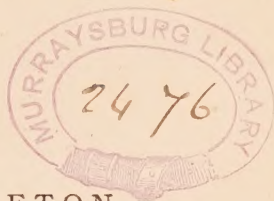




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CATCHING A TARTAR.

A Novel.



BY

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'Sperate Miseri. Cavete Felices.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CATCHING A TARTAR.

CHAPTER I.

MR. PALMER.

YIELDING to Smythe's urgent solicitations, however, Martha consented to go first of all to a neighbouring hotel to breakfast. In consideration of valuable services rendered, cabby, in the meantime, was retained for the journey to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

It was growing dark in an ominously rapid manner when they again entered the hansom. Indeed, by the time Newgate Prison was reached, they were overtaken by a genuine London fog. In an instant the air had thickened into something closely resembling smoke. Roofs of buildings vanished ; lines of lower windows and doorways were quickly blurred into indistinctness. Suddenly a light

burst feebly forth in the midst of the closing darkness, and about it gathered a dirty saffron nimbus.

‘What, for heaven’s sake, has happened?’ exclaimed Smythe at last, with a sneeze; ‘is the town on fire?’

‘Oh dear no!’ said Marty, removing her muff from her mouth, ‘it’s only a London fog; that is all.’

‘*That is all!*’ he repeated; ‘a London catarrh, *I* should think,’ and he sneezed again.

Thicker and blacker it grew: the sun, which had hung until now like a copper ball above their heads, disappeared entirely. Great omnibuses now and then loomed up out of the yellow haze, their drivers shouting and cursing from beneath their tarpaulins. Wheels became interlocked; and bewildered pedestrians, attempting to ford the highway, ran a double risk of being trampled to death and prodded by carriage poles.

It was cold, too—a coldness with all the sting, and crispness, and sparkle taken out of it as with a wet cloth—a raw, penetrating, clammy chill that matted the hair, and made the clothes hang limp upon the person; flakes of soot, viscid and sticky, clung to face and hands, and the ooze as of a general perspira-

tion soon lay upon everything. Then Martha called to the cabman to let down the glass, and in this manner they crept at last into Lincoln's Inn Fields, where the fog, rarefied to a dirty amber hue, admitted a slight infiltration of light sufficient to make the road itself visible. On the right arose the faint adumbration of a row of buildings; on the left, the naked trees and shrubbery in the gardens started out like lines and splashes upon a blotting pad, congested here into one huge blot, intertwined there in a tangle of moist and dripping twigs.

It seemed an almost superhuman achievement, under the circumstances, for cabby to find Mr. Palmer's number, but he did it; and Smythe, after the glass had been drawn up, threw open the leaves of the door and sprang upon the kerb. Little as yet could be seen of the house; it stood some distance back from the road, and an iron fence and a single shaft of an Ionic portico were alone visible.

He extended his hand for her to alight.

'One moment first,' she said. 'I'm *so* sorry, Charley, I can't let you come in—and what *will* you do out here in the cold? It really is *too* bad.'

Charley's countenance fell.

'I won't listen,' he said. 'I'll stuff sealing-wax in my ears, like that chap—what's his name?—Ulysses. I will, really.'

'No, no, Charley, I'd rather not; and I know that you'll be a good, reasonable boy, won't you?'

'Oh Lord! these girls!' he mentally exclaimed; then aloud: 'Jump out, then. Mind your dress. There! you won't be long, I suppose?'

'No, no, Charley, I truly won't—fifteen minutes at the furthest; but it *is* so cold, what *will* you do while I am gone?'

'Well, I think cabby and I had better go somewhere and get a pore-opener, eh, cabby?'

Cabby, who had been blowing upon his fingers and flapping his arms chanticleer fashion, suddenly ceased this gymnastic exercise, and intimated that 'in this ere narsty weather, he didn't mind if he did hev a pint with the gentleman.' Whereupon—after Smythe had escorted Martha to the door, and had satisfied himself by the perusal of a sign-board in the passage that Henry Palmer, solicitor, was to be found during office-hours upon 'the first-floor front—he

replunged into the hansom, and was duly conveyed to a temple of Bacchus in an adjoining street, where cabby's opinion of Smythe, stimulated by frequent potations of 'fours of rum 'ot,' rose so rapidly, that it overflowed at last into an important disclosure, of which, however, more anon.

It was a fine old mansion, like many others in Lincoln's-inn-Fields, and Martha found herself admiring the spacious hall and the broad staircase with its oaken banisters as she ascended to the first story. Arrived upon the landing, she was confronted by two signs: and knocking upon the door which bore the words, 'clerks' office,' it was immediately opened by a tall, pale young gentleman, who waved her with a jerk of his head to a putty-complexioned, clean-shaven individual, with great gooseberry eyes and still greater 'bladders' beneath them, who rose from his desk, thrust a pen into a tuft of hair above his ear, and demanded her name and business.

Martha answered that she was Miss Summerfield, and that the nature of her business would probably be inferred by Mr. Palmer if her presence was made known to him.

Whereupon the putty-complexioned man,

who was chief-clerk, gave a surreptitious wink to the pale-faced youth, who was an articled-clerk, then disappeared through a green baize-door, and as quickly returned.

‘Kindly walk this way, Miss Summerfield,’ he said, waving his hand in the direction of the legal sanctum.

As she entered, a dapper, clean-shaven middle-aged gentleman, with iron-grey hair and irreproachable linen, rose from a table and advanced to meet her.

‘Well, well, this *is* a surprise,’ he said, shaking her cordially by the hand and leading her to a chair by the fire. ‘Do come and warm yourself; you must have nearly perished in this dreadful fog—this “pea-soup,” as we call it, though it’s er—ha! ha! a one-sided compliment, rather, I think. What—er—will you have to warm you up? I have some port here you need not be afraid of. Will you try a glass?’

Martha assenting, she had time, while he was busy with the glasses, to take a hasty survey of the room. The dim flicker of gas in a rusty burner, combined with the sage-green of the light in the window-panes, gave a bilious complexion to the wall-paper and objects generally. There was a book-case

filled with sheep-skin tomes, a number of tin-boxes heavily padlocked, and bearing names of clients in staring white letters, an old horse-hair sofa, littered with documents, and a mahogany writing-table covered with files of correspondence.

‘There, try a drop of that—there is no better antidote to fog in the world, I assure you,’ said Mr. Palmer, reappearing with glasses and a very dusty bottle at this point in her observations.

‘Thank you very much, Mr. Palmer,’ she returned, drinking the wine and replacing the glass in his hands. ‘And now will you kindly listen at once to what I have to say?’ and she drew her chair up to the table. ‘A friend is waiting for me outside in a cab, so that I am compelled to be as brief as possible.’

‘Dear me! Won’t your—er—friend come inside, Miss Summerfield? Permit me to send one of my clerks and ascertain?’

‘Oh no, thanks; I would much rather not,’ she answered quickly.

‘Ah! just so—of course—I understand,’ he said, with a significant nod of his head; then, wheeling up his chair—a most disreputable piece of furniture, greasy, disembowelled, and profusely freckled with ink spots—he seated

himself, crossed his legs, and assumed an attitude of respectful attention.

‘You received my letter, Mr. Palmer, and read it carefully, I suppose?’ she began.

‘I did,’ he answered, ‘and I congratulate you upon giving such—er—’ here the fog getting into his throat he was obliged to cough—‘such an interesting exposition of a—a most remarkable case.’

‘It is very kind in you to say so, I am sure, Mr. Palmer,’ said Martha. ‘I simply obeyed your injunctions, and I should feel amply compensated for my labour in knowing that you will be thereby enabled the better to aid me with your valuable advice.’

‘Just so,’ he assented, uncrossing his legs and shifting his position so as to be able, as Martha thought, to intercept any chance thread of her communication that might otherwise find its way through the green baize door and into the outer office.

‘I am glad to be in a position to state,’ she resumed, ‘that my residence in Deadwick has resulted in an important discovery.’

‘Indeed! In other words, I suppose you have ascertained that Lydia Parker and Mrs. Brophy are one and the same person,’ rejoined Mr. Palmer, once more shifting his position

and smiling, as she thought, in a very singular manner.

‘Precisely so,’ she answered.

‘And you are prepared to establish this beyond a doubt?’

‘Beyond a doubt.’

‘Do not think, Miss Summerfield,’ he quickly added—‘do not think that I question your ability to prove this fact, if I ask by what means you would be able to do so.’

Martha considered a moment.

‘Well, in the first place,’ she said, ‘by the evidence of a gentleman who knew Lydia Parker in America—the Mr. Smythe mentioned in my letter, who fortunately arrived in England a few days ago.’

‘And who, I presume, is now sitting outside in this mouldy atmosphere saying unkind things of our London climate?’ interposed Mr. Palmer pleasantly.

Martha, knowing that Charley could be profane upon occasion, smiled in turn at this, and said :

‘You are a good guesser, Mr. Palmer;’ then, in a graver tone, she added : ‘Would his corroboration of my statement be more satisfactory to you? If so, send for him at once.’

‘By no means, Miss Summerfield; must I infer from your words that he has seen Mrs. Brophy?’

‘Yes.’

‘And recognises her to be the woman he knew under the name of Lydia Parker in Perth Amboy?’

‘He does.’

‘That is quite sufficient. It is enough to know that were corroboration required it would be immediately forthcoming. Pray proceed, Miss Summerfield.’

‘I also found,’ continued Martha, ‘a portrait of Mrs. Warren in Mrs. Brophy’s album. She not only admitted it to be such, but volunteered the statement that she had travelled for several years with Mrs. Warren, and had visited America during that period.’

‘Was this said in the presence of witnesses?’

‘Of competent witnesses—yes.’

‘Very good—very good; this is definite progress,’ he said, once more shifting the position of his legs, and gazing attentively at the fire a moment; then, looking up, he continued, in an altered, and it maybe, more professional tone: ‘Let us now carefully survey the ground, Miss Summerfield. You are now

in a position to definitely state, and prove by the testimony of others, that Mrs. Brophy was once known as Lydia Parker, and that, under this name, she visited America in the year 1861 in company with a lady known by hearsay to you as Mrs. Warren, that the two resided, in the summer of that year, in the town of Perth Amboy, were on terms of intimacy with your father, and disappeared simultaneously with him. Do I state the case with sufficient clearness, Miss Summerfield ?

‘ You certainly do, Mr. Palmer.’

‘ I do not wish to discourage you,’ he pursued, with a compassionate smile, ‘ but did it ever occur to you, my dear young lady, that this is the only piece of *real* evidence you have obtained in the matter, and that, legally speaking, it amounts to a barren *nil* ?’

That this thought *had* never occurred to her was clearly made manifest by her look of blank astonishment.

‘ Unless,’ he continued, after a careful examination of her face—‘ unless you have omitted to mention some feature in your discovery which would tend to throw additional—er—illumination upon the subject.’

‘ Well, to tell the truth, I had scarcely finished when you commenced to sum up the

evidence in such a terribly conclusive manner. The additional evidence you require is this ; and Martha proceeded to narrate, with the exception of what Smythe had said in relation to her mother's intimacy with the stranger, all that had occurred the previous evening.

Mr. Palmer listened attentively ; and as if to stimulate his mental processes, poured out and drank a glass of wine during the progress of her narrative. When she had finished, he reflected awhile, then, with the practical caution of his craft, he said :

‘What you have told me, Miss Summerfield, may or may not have a bearing upon the case. In the absence of any collateral evidence, I should incline to a negative opinion. Am I right in assuming that you are not in a position to furnish me with any additional evidence ?’

‘Nothing I deem of any consequence,’ she answered, colouring.

He watched her closely an instant ; then, the fog getting into his throat once more, he was seized with quite a violent fit of coughing. When this was over, he said, leaning over the table, and in a more confidential tone than he had yet assumed :

‘Regard me somewhat in the light of a

family physician, if you please, Miss Summerfield. Without perfect frankness upon your part, I cannot give an intelligible opinion, or aid you in any way.'

Then, being a virtuoso in the art of eliciting evidence, he made a retrograde movement. It was plain she was keeping something back, and was invulnerable to an appeal of this nature. 'However,' he continued, throwing himself back in his chair and meditatively stroking his chin, 'when I reflect upon the matter, I see nothing very remarkable in it, after all. Mrs. Brophy may have had—er—a connection before her marriage, which it is quite natural to suppose she would not wish to become known to her husband. It is a reasonable conjecture I think, too, that this stranger may have, at some time, occupied a prominent place in—er—Mrs. Brophy's affections. His reappearance would, therefore, naturally produce a shock to that lady's nervous system. In the course of a long professional experience, I *have* known of such cases, and therefore speak advisedly. Indeed, such—er—shocks have to my certain knowledge resulted before now in what is commonly called a *decree nisi*. But I am unnecessarily protracting this interview, Miss

Summerfield. I was about to say, when I entered upon this digression, that the purpose of this stranger, whoever he may be, was unquestionably to obtain money; and it is equally obvious to my mind that Mrs. Brophy considered the maintenance of her secret well worth the expenditure of—how much?—two hundred pounds?’

‘Yes,’ said Martha; ‘and it is her ability to pay such a sum that excites my surprise and my suspicion.’

‘Are you prepared to prove that the circumstance is in anywise suspicious or surprising? Do you know enough of her to justify such an assertion? Are you prepared to deny that she possesses sufficient wealth of her own to purchase the silence of a dozen importunate lovers?’

‘But the fact of her travelling with Mrs. Warren?’

‘Points to nothing, of itself; you are not in a position to deny that she is a relative of Mrs. Warren’s. You cannot affirm that she travelled with the latter for any other purpose than amusement and pleasure.’

‘But suppose that *Mr.* Brophy is unaware of her possessing this money?’ said Martha.

‘Ah, that is quite another matter!’ rejoined

Mr. Palmer. 'She *could* conceal it from him of course. Any wife, had she a motive for so doing, might accomplish such a thing very easily, perhaps, but the act would be an unnatural one and darkly suspicious.'

'Assuming that to be the case in the present instance, might not my *father* have purchased this woman's silence?'

'It is not probable,' he answered, 'nor even possible, a motive being the keystone of any such supposition. Five parallel lines are very insignificant things, Miss Summerfield; but without them the "Messiah" and "Fidelio" could not have been written. If your father really *eloped* with Mrs. Warren, he might as well have attempted to bribe the winds of heaven to keep it secret. Such an abrupt withdrawal from the observance of fixed social conditions can never be effected in silence. You can never muzzle the *on dits*, or administer an anæsthetic to the genius of scandal. No, Miss Summerfield, I should incline to quite a different supposition.'

'That my father, then, was robbed?' interposed Martha warmly.

'I am scarcely prepared to go to the length of making such an assertion, Miss Summer-

field. One cannot see one's way clearly in the dark. This is altogether a thorny question, and midnight is a bad time for groping among briars. You cannot solve the question yourself, *that* is certain ; you cannot play the spy, with the risk of being publicly branded as such, upon a woman who may be as innocent as myself of any complicity in your father's disappearance.

‘So long as you withhold anything from me which may tend to the elucidation of this mystery, you are in the condition of a moribund patient who conceals dangerous symptoms from his family physician. Employing this illustration for the second time, may I for the second time beg you to evince your confidence in me by disclosing what I suspect to be important evidence bearing upon this intricate business.’

Martha reddened again, and said :

‘Well, if I have been wanting at all in candour, the offence is at least a trivial one, and prompted by the conviction that what I have withheld would throw no additional light upon the subject. The fact hitherto concealed by me is that, during the summer of 1861, this stranger was a frequent visitor at my father's house.’

‘Did you ever see him there?’ asked Mr. Palmer, after a moment’s reflection.

‘Never. I am indebted for this information to Mr. Smythe.’

‘Dear me! May I ask, Miss Summerfield, whether this man was a friend of your father’s?’

There was a long pause, then Martha answered:

‘I may as well be frank with you. The stranger visited my mother in my father’s absence;’ then, observing an upward movement of Mr. Palmer’s eyebrows, she quickly added, ‘and I feel confident that he is a relative of my mother’s.’

Mr. Palmer had an immediate access of that troublesome cough.

‘Just so—just so,’ he presently said. ‘I think you mentioned in your letter that she was of French extraction?’

‘Yes.’

‘And this man, then, of course, is French also?’

‘He has that appearance, at least, and he speaks with a foreign accent.’

‘Ah—yes; your conjecture, then, Miss Summerfield, is a reasonable one, and might satisfactorily explain his presence in Perth

Amboy that summer. I say *might*, because his appearance there would appear to be coincident with the arrival of Lydia Parker. You are not prepared to state, I suppose, that *their* acquaintance began at that time ?

‘I am not.’

‘You see, I possess very uncertain data upon which to build up any kind of a supposition. Mrs. Brophy’s connection with this man—for connection of some kind there *must* have been—may or may not have begun at that time. But that your mother possessed a previous acquaintance with him is, I take it, proved beyond a question or doubt.’

‘I think so. Yes.’

‘You were with your mother constantly, I suppose—from the date of the accident ?’

‘Day and night—yes.’

‘She was in a state of great excitement, I believe, when you arrived home that day ?’

‘Very great.’

‘And was oppressed by melancholy forebodings as to the safety of your father ?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did that occur to you at the time as being at all singular ?’

‘Certainly not ; she was always of a very nervous temperament.’

‘Did she ever appear to entertain a doubt as to the death of your father?’

‘I think not; she died very shortly after his disappearance, and in the interval she spoke but little. She made a great effort to tell me something the afternoon she died, but I failed to perceive any meaning in the few words I caught from her lips.’

‘Do you remember them?’ he asked, leaning over and taking pen and paper in hand.

‘Perfectly. Yes.’

‘Would you have any objection to my taking a memorandum of what they were?’

‘Not in the least; they were simply—“*Dix mois avant*”—then something which sounded like—“*mon mariage*”—though I am not certain upon that point, and “*pardon, chérie*”—that was all.’

‘Will you—er—kindly write it down? I’m a little rusty in my French,’ said Mr. Palmer, tendering her the pen and paper with a smile.

When she had complied, he examined the words attentively a moment, then said:

‘Oh, yes, I see; indefinite enough, I confess. Will you—er—oblige me with your mother’s maiden name, Miss Summerfield?’

‘Certainly—Louise Dessart.’

‘Thank you’—writing it down. ‘And she was at one time connected, I think you said, with the “Théâtre du Gymnase,” in Paris?’

‘She was.’

‘Just so, thank you’—making a further addition to his memorandum. ‘Now, may I be permitted to ask,’ he continued, ‘whether at the time of this attempted communication, it was your impression that some heavy burden lay upon your mother’s mind?’

‘Yes, I had such an impression,’ she answered, after a little hesitation.

‘And do you still persist in that belief?’

‘Y-e-s; I have seen no good reason for changing it.’

‘Just so, of course,’ he continued, looking up with a quick, sharp glance of inquiry, ‘if this—er—stranger had visited your mother *subsequent* to your father’s disappearance, *you* must have known it?’

‘Certainly, sir. What do you mean?’ came the emphatic interrogation, accompanied by a very red face.

‘A formality, that is all, Miss Summerfield, though a very essential one to this inquiry. Do you know of your own knowledge whether this man was seen in Perth Amboy upon the day of the accident?’

‘ I do not.’

‘ Or at any time *after* the accident ?’

‘ Again *no* ; this is what you lawyers call cross-examination, is it not ? Have you suspicions against this man ?’

‘ It would be premature in me to declare them, if I had, Miss Summerfield ; I will say this, however, that if this man *is* implicated in your father’s disappearance, you may safely dismiss Mrs. Warren from the case at once.’

Martha, objecting to have her prepossessions so rudely disturbed, became argumentative immediately, after the feminine fashion.

‘ Oh, nonsense ! I don’t think so ; the evidence is very strong against Mrs. Warren, and when I find her I feel sure I shall find my father. Did I not trace them *both* to Leamington, to Venice, and Rome ?’

‘ You traced Mr. and Mrs. Warren and Lydia Parker to those places ; are you sure your father was of the number ? Did it never occur to you that there was something remarkable in the fact of a man like your father—and an *Englishman*, assuming the name of his—er—of a lady ?’

‘ Such a fact, if we admit it, would equally forbid the presumption of his running away at all, I should think,’ said Martha with an

uneasy sense, when she had spoken, of making an important admission.

‘Ah! my dear Miss Summerfield, that was a most sensible remark, and I rejoice to hear it coming from your lips,’ he rejoined; ‘now listen a moment while I analyse the case you have against Mrs. Warren,’ he continued, with what seemed like a very malicious smile. ‘Are you sure, in the first place, that your father left Perth Amboy at all on the day of the supposed accident?’

Martha opened her eyes wide with astonishment.

‘Why, of course I am,’ she answered.

‘Did you *see* him leave?’

‘No—o.’

‘Do you know anybody that *did*?’

‘No—o; but mother knew he *intended* to go.’

‘Intended, yes; but *did* he go? that is the question.’

‘Well, I have no reason to doubt it.’

‘Could you swear to the *fact*?’

Martha was much perplexed.

‘Well, the boat was found capsized,’ she answered evasively.

‘Very true; but who was in it? and, indeed, what evidence have you that it did not

drift away empty from its moorings during the storm ?’

‘ Mrs. Brophy could answer that question.’

‘ How do you know ? you did not see her enter the boat, and I very much doubt if you know of anybody that *did*.’

Martha was silent.

‘ The fact of the matter is this,’ he pursued, in a pleasant strain, and throwing himself back in his chair, ‘ I read your letter, Miss Summerfield, with great interest ; as I remarked before, it was a very interesting exposition of the case, but defective in many points, as I will now proceed to show. The affair, to my mind, is beginning to wear a very serious aspect, and unless I am very much mistaken, if you prosecute your inquiries in the proper direction, you will shortly be in a position to demand legal assistance in the matter. Now, to do this, you must be in a condition clearly to prove :

‘ 1. That your father—I lay emphasis upon this, because the point is a very essential one—that your father really disappeared upon a certain day from the town of Perth Amboy, and has never since been seen.

‘ 2. That he was *last seen* entering a yacht called the *Flora*, which was afterwards found

bottom upwards in the bay, and that with him were two ladies, named respectively Mrs. Warren and Lydia Parker.

‘If suddenly called upon to do this, *could* you do it, Miss Summerfield? I am afraid—indeed, I am *sure* not. You would break down in the preliminary examination. In the law, Miss Summerfield,’ he pursued, in a didactic manner, ‘you will find the principles of indifferentism carried out to their fullest extent. With the same turn of the wheel it will grind one mortal into powder, and raise another into the beatitudes. It has its amenities, of course, but they are only skin deep, after all; and as for sympathies, it possesses them no more than a railway train does which will bear you with comfort and ease to your destination, or mangle you beyond recognition if you attempt to obstruct its progress. Clever barristers may succeed in drenching a jury-box with sympathetic tears; but in all probability, the voice of the law from the bench will straightway petrify twelve British hearts into twelve British flints. We lawyers, Miss Summerfield, are denied the convenient eclecticism of other professions. You painters, for example, can cover your canvas with angels, convert them at pleasure into fiends,

and metamorphose the whole again into a May-pole dance ; such is the prerogative of art. Legal formulas, however, are as inelastic as the ten commandments, or the multiplication table. Twice three are six with us, and there is no use in mincing the matter. There are people, however, good worthy souls too, who take to litigation as they would to horse-racing or billiards ; and when they come to me with a bad case expecting the law to fit it as though it had been measured and only needed the trying on, I frequently feel it my duty to explain to them that I have no particular objection to attacking windmills in their behalf, but that quixotic enterprises are as a rule expensive, and—'

'Well, Mr. Palmer,' interrupted Martha at this point, 'this is all very entertaining and instructive ; but will you please tell me what bearing it has upon the matter in hand ?'

'Simply this, my dear young lady, that I fear, in a criminal charge, you would, with nothing but a nucleus of a case as yet, stand not a ghost of a chance of success.'

'Why, what do you mean ?' said Martha, starting to her feet. 'Am I to infer from all this that you believe my father has been *murdered* ?'

‘ I am—er—scarcely prepared to go to the length of affirming such a thing,’ he answered, rising and taking up a position with his back to the fire ; ‘ but there are suspicious circumstances, you must confess.’

‘ What, then, do you advise me to do next ?’ she demanded sharply.

Without seeming to notice her display of ill-nature, he replied :

‘ I would, I think, ask Mrs. Brophy for Mrs. Warren’s address, stating at the same time who you are, and the object of your inquiry. If she refuses, the act would be sufficiently suspicious to justify a searching investigation into her connection with her former mistress. If she consents, go at once to Mrs. Warren, confront her boldly, and I am sure you will be satisfied with the result. Do this, and disabuse your mind, as I am sure you will, of an erroneous impression, then come and see me again. In the meantime, I shall set a few inquiries of my own on foot in relation to this stranger. Ah ! a cab has stopped at the door. Your friend, perhaps, has not suffered so much from the weather as we had imagined,’ he added, stepping to the window.

The fog had nearly disappeared, and the

trees in the gardens were visible enough now. A hansom, in truth, had stopped at the door, and a young man with a blonde moustache was then crossing the courtyard.

Martha, peeping over Mr. Palmer's shoulder, saw this much, looked at her watch, and exclaimed :

‘I have kept that poor boy waiting for three quarters of an hour. Good-day, Mr. Palmer, and a thousand thanks for your advice. I shall see you again very soon.’

Then declining, in spite of his insistence, to take another glass of port, she received a parting injunction from that astute gentleman, ran the usual gauntlet of *oeillades*—as she passed through the clerks' office, and hastily descended the stairs.

CHAPTER II.

THE CABBY'S SUGGESTION AND WHAT CAME
OF IT.

'I AM *so* sorry to have kept you waiting all this time, Charley,' said Martha, as they crossed the courtyard together; 'but this Mr. Palmer is a regular old croaker, and he has tried very hard to make me believe that I am a simpleton—like you.'

'Oh, Marty!'

'You are, Charley—you know you are; a dear, good, kind, silly boy; and yet you are worth a dozen——'

'Dexters?' he interposed.

'No; and you will make me cross if you talk like that. I meant you were worth a dozen of *me*.'

That melted him like wax.

'Marty, your little finger is more precious to me than—than——'

‘There, I told you you were a simpleton; let go my hand immediately! My little finger is precious to me, too, and I won’t have it squeezed.’

By this time they stood beside the cab.

‘Jump in, Marty dear;’ and he extended his hand.

‘Not Marty *dear*, but Marty Summerfield, if you please, Mr. Smythe.’

‘Now you are teasing me again, and it isn’t fair. I have something to tell you, too. There! Be reasonable, Marty! Be yourself. That’s better. I like to see you smile. Jump in! You have nowhere to go, I suppose?’

‘Yes, I have;’ and craning up her neck she said to the cabman: ‘Drive on slowly—Holborn way—toward Oxford Street. Now, Mr. Smythe, the paragon is prepared to listen. The queen gives you audience—begin.’

‘Well, nobody would ever believe that I once made mud-pies and played hop-scotch with *you*. However, your majesty, I begin. You see, cabby and I—a good fellow that cabby is too—supports a widowed mother and *eleven* children—we went to a——’

‘You needn’t tell me; you are positively *soaked*, Mr. Smythe.’

‘In fog, yes, I should think I was. Just feel my coat, Marty.’

‘No, sir, I mean in *whisky*.’

‘Oh, that *is* good. I haven’t tasted a drop.’

‘Charley!’

‘Oh, it was only for want of a chance, that’s all. You see, cabby and I went into a public-house just round the corner, and what do you think, Marty! the bar-tender was a *woman*! pon honour! You needn’t laugh, it’s the truth; and she says to me: “A narsty morning, sir,” and stood waiting for the order. So I turned to cabby and said: “Name your poison, old man.”—“Well,” he said, “it *is* a bit darmp, and I don’t mind if I *do* hev a four o’ rum ’ot, sir.”—“All right,” I said; “and as for me, mum, you may give me a rye cocktail.”—“A what!” she said.—“A *rye* cocktail,” said I; “I hate Bourbon;” and that’s a fact—so I do. Well, *I* never saw such a look in a girl’s face in all my life. She mixed the cabby’s drink, stared at me a minute, then deliberately turned her back and commenced to talk to a lot of fellows who stood in a sort of private box with pewter mugs in their hands. Well, of course *I* wasn’t going to stand any such nonsense as that, and I was cold too, so I said: “Look here, mum,”

said I, "where's my cocktail?" At that she faced round and said: "What are you charffing of me for, anyhow?" I said: "*I* don't know; I want a drink, that is all. Haven't you got any rye?"—"No," she said, "I harn't."—"Then give me a whisky-skin," I said; "perhaps you hain't got *that* either."—"No we harn't—no sich rubbish," she said. Then I got mad. "Thunder and Mars!" I said, "what *have* you got, then? I don't care what it is, as long as it is *hot*, and has got a bit of lemon in it. What is that you are drinking, cabby?"—"Rum, sir," said he, and he put down an empty glass upon the counter. "Well," said I to the woman, "just make two more of the same sort;" and while she was doing it, the cabby stepped over and whispered in my ear: "Some little game up with that ere *parley-vous* chap at the Bink, eh?" said he. "Oh, I know '*im*.'"—"Do you," said I, "then you are in luck, that is all; what is his name?"—"Well, I carn't say as to the name, sir," said he; "but I can tell you where he's to be found, sir, most of the time." And now, Marty, you see, I suppose, what I am up to?

Martha, by way of reply, called to the cabman, and asked:

‘Where do you intend taking this gentleman?’

‘To Leicester Square, miss,’ was the response.

‘Which is the nearest station on the “Underground” for Bayswater?’

‘Gower Street, miss.’

‘Drive there, then, at once. Now Charley,’ she added, turning to him, ‘I’m going to my rooms. They are a long distance from here; and it would be a useless waste of time for you to go up there and come back again; and indeed, in deference to Mrs. Grundy, I wouldn’t let you come within a half mile of my apartments for a hundred pounds; so go and find out what you can, and meet me at Blanchard’s, at two sharp. Remember, Blanchard’s, in Regent Street; anybody will tell you where it is.’

Martha was duly deposited at the Gower Street Station; and half an hour later, the cab stopped in front of a café in — Street, Leicester Square.

‘I see ’im go in, sir, this ’ere blessed minute!’ said cabby in a hoarse whisper.

‘Good boy!’ said Smythe, leaping out, and slipping a sovereign into his hand, ‘I hope I’ll see you again, old fellow!’

‘Well, sir, I hope so, with all my ’art, sir.’ Good morning, sir, and thank’ee kindly;’ and he tipped his hat and drove away in a state of mingled rum and elation.

Smythe pushed open the door, and nearly stumbled over two immense dogs, which lay before a stove in the centre of the room. Then, glancing around him, he saw at one extremity a raised counter, bearing a leaning tower of plates and an artificial and hectic hydrangea in full bloom, behind which sat a patient Penelope knitting. Marble-top tables extended down two sides of the room. At one of these, half obscured by the *Journal des Débats*, sat the object of his quest; opposite were tables draped with snowy cloths, and obviously prepared for a *déjeuner à la fourchette*. At one of these, as furnishing a convenient point of espial, Smythe seated himself, and beckoned to a lantern-jawed waiter, who stood in a corner bending over a basin of *croûte au pot*.

‘Que désirez-vous, monsieur?’ said the latter, suddenly rushing up to the table, and bringing with him, a strong odour of cabbage and leek.

‘Hey!’ said Smythe.

‘Vat vill you haf, sare?’

‘Oh, I don’t know ; what have you got ?’

The waiter brought a *menu*, which Smythe opened and threw away with disgust.

‘Bother your French,’ said he ; ‘got any good broiled oysters ?’

‘I vill see, sare,’ said the waiter, opening a closet-door, and bawling down some subterranean depth. Smythe thought a horrible row was going on, by the clatter of voices which at once ensued. The waiter soon returned with a doleful wag of his head.

‘Ah no, sare ; it is not posseeble !’

‘A stew, then, and a little cold slaw ; that will answer just as well.’

The waiter walked mechanically away, returned, shifted a napkin from his left arm to his right, picked up the menu, and looked through it in a helpless manner ; then he shook his head and said :

‘We haf natifs, sare ; will you try ?’

‘Yes, yes—anything ; but see here,’ motioning the waiter to approach, and slipping a florin into his palm, ‘do you know the name of that man who is sitting over there with a newspaper in his hand ?’

‘Ah, oui—Monsieur Mivart,’ said the waiter, raising his eyes to the mirror an instant.

‘Hey ! — who ? Here — just write that

down.' When the waiter had complied, Charley looked at the name, and said rather contemptuously, 'Mivvert, eh? why didn't you say so before? Well, run along then, Johnny, and bring those—what did you call 'em?'

'Natifs, sare.'

'Are they oysters, or *what* ?'

'Oh yes, sare ; ver-r-y good.'

'All right ; bring a dozen on the half shell, and if I like them, I'll try a few. When I'm in a strange country I always like to sample things first.'

When the waiter had gone to execute the demand, Smythe deliberately arose, crossed the room, and tapped the stranger on the shoulder.

'Hallo, Mivvert, old boy!—how de do?' he said, extending his hand.

Mr. Mivart dropped his paper, and looked up in unmistakable amazement at the speaker.

He had on a new coat and hat ; and his moustache and imperial, both of which were slightly grizzled, had been recently trimmed and waxed. He was unquestionably a very handsome man ; and if Smythe had belonged to the other sex, he would perhaps have experienced a 'sensation,' as a pair of soft dark eyes looked into his, and a set of

dazzling white teeth glistened beneath his moustache as he spoke.

‘You are, as I believe,’ he said, in a slight foreign accent, after a moment’s scrutiny of Charley’s features, ‘the gentleman I did meet last evening in Deadwick?’

‘Just so,’ said Smythe, seating himself, without further ceremony, at the table; ‘and I must apologise for not speaking to you then. You see I couldn’t exactly place you; it only struck me who you were when I saw you at the Bank of England. I’ve such a confounded poor memory for faces, you know; what will you have to drink?’

No amount of mental coercion will ever suffice to change the human countenance into a mask when strong emotions are stirring the heart. M. Mivart, at this moment, endeavoured to simulate an appearance of indifference, but signally failed in the attempt.

‘I will take nothing, I thank you,’ he said. ‘But, truly, sir, you have the advantage ofer me. I do not recall your face at all.’

‘Oh, I have changed, I suppose!’ said Smythe, with a laugh. ‘It is five years since you saw me last, and of course I was very young at that time. Do you remember Perth Amboy?’

The sudden rush of blood to M. Mivart's naturally pale face made quite a startling metamorphosis in that gentleman's appearance.

'Perth Amboy! oh, yes!—Perth Amboy!' he repeated nervously, twisting his moustache; 'is it that you have ever seen me there?'

'Well,' said Charley, 'I never saw you anywhere else until yesterday.'

'I do not remember you; where then did I haf the honour of meeting you?' pursued the stranger, still twisting his moustache. He gave a perceptible start, as Smythe answered:

'At Mr. Summerfield's, one afternoon, when he was away. I met you with Miss Parker, the next morning, in the grove. I saw you frequently after that, and we once went blue-fishing together. *Now* do you remember me?'

'Ah, yes,' said Mr. Mivart, with increased uneasiness of manner, 'they called you Charley—let me see—Charley something.'

'Smythe.'

'Yes; I remember you very well, though I should never haf recognise you again. Travelling for pleasure, sir?'

In a preliminary exchange of civilities, this question had such a natural and proper

place, that Smythe failed to notice the anxious tone in which it was uttered. He did, however, observe a pale face bending down to his as he hesitated in his reply.

He was thinking of Martha, and that, in one sense, his journey had, indeed, been one of pleasure, when the hot breath of his companion recalled him to the necessity of answering the question.

‘Not much, I ain’t,’ he replied, ‘and that is what makes my meeting with you such a thundering coincidence, don’t you see?’

M. Mivart started back, shrugged his shoulders, and with an uneasy smile demanded an explanation.

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Charley, looking round the room and lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, which involved the bending forward of the stranger’s face once more, ‘you are the very man I have been looking for.’

At this point the waiter appeared with the oysters, and turned Charley’s thoughts into quite another channel for a moment.

‘Oysters!’ he said, contemptuously. ‘*Oysters!* why, they ain’t as big as a fellow’s overcoat buttons. *The very best!* Well, all right, then, if that is so, put ’em down, and

bring me four dozen more. Is *that* the sort of oysters they have over here?' he pursued, turning to M. Mivart, when the appearance of that gentleman's face brought him back at once to the topic from which he had made so abrupt a digression.

'Ah, yes, it *is* a coincidence, my meeting you, Mivvert,' he continued. 'You see, I am helping to clear up a mysterious business, and I am sure you can aid me in the matter, and if you *can* you will, won't you?'

M. Mivart was beginning now to get his features fairly under control. He smiled again, and shrugged his shoulders, and said :

'That of course depends. First, I will hear this that you have to say, then I can answer intelligently.'

'Well, then, it is about Mr. Summerfield's disappearance.'

'His disappearance!' simulating astonishment.

'Oh, yes, you know all about it. Come, now, *I* saw you in Amboy the day after the accident,' rejoined Smythe, fixing a remarkably steady glance upon his companion.

'Of course—of course ; but you say I can aid you in explaining Mr. Summerfield's disappearance. How can I do this? Mr.

Summerfield was drowned, that is all I know.'

'You *know* he was drowned, do you say?' pursued Smythe, still maintaining the steadiness of his look.

'That is what was said; they looked for his body when I left Amboy. I suppose it was found. You should know better than I. *Was* it ever found?'

There was a tone of anxiety in this inquiry, a look of eager interest in the eyes of the questioner, a sudden tenseness and hardening of all the muscles of his face, a quickened respiration in the man himself, that would soon have ended in a pant, which would have at once impressed an acute observer. But Charley was not, in a certain sense, an acute observer at all. He had the cheeriest possible faith in humanity, as a rule—believing that evil was limited to the criminal classes, for whom reformatories and jails were provided as a sort of moral quarantine. He had never conceived of well-dressed villainy moving in the first circles of society, speaking several foreign languages, and prominent in the church—of villainy dropping eleemosynary offerings everywhere in the presence of witnesses into hospital boxes, and scatter-

ing broadcast sweet social amenities ; of villainy blessed with brave sons and lovely daughters, and enjoying, in spite of the proverb, a large share of substantial human comforts. A plausible tale of sorrow was ever an 'open sesame' to his purse-strings. He never withheld a sixpence from a beggar for fear it would be spent at the public-house. 'Poor devil!' he would say, 'it will keep out the damp and the cold, at all events, and help him to forget his misery for a time.' He would have made a miserable magistrate and a still worse bank-manager ; and though he possessed no vices, and indulged in few personal extravagances, he was still one whose property should have been under the control of iron-hearted trustees.

Paying little heed, therefore, to M. Mivart's perturbation, he answered :

'Oh no ; people say that is all nonsense about his having been drowned.'

A surprising change came at once over the stranger's face.

'Eh, well, what is this, then, that these people do say ?' he demanded.

'That he eloped with Mrs. Warren and abandoned his wife and child—that is what they say,' said Smythe, with great earnestness.

Again, had he possessed a greater knowledge of the world, would he have noted the look of relief that crept over M. Mivart's features. Perhaps the latter himself was aware of this, for he hardened his facial muscles once more, and asked :

‘ And you belief this ?’

‘ Well, I cannot say. But Miss Summerfield has no doubt whatever upon the subject. You know who I mean. You saw her with me last evening.’

M. Mivart stretched forth his hand and laid it upon Smythe's shoulder.

‘ Will you mean to tell me,’ he said, in an excited way, ‘ that this pretty young lady is Martha ?’

‘ I do ; but what do you know of her ? She was at school while you were in Perth Amboy.’

Charley had a disagreeable sense of being looked over in a very searching manner by the stranger before he replied. At last, withdrawing his hand from Charley's shoulder, he said :

‘ I haf seen her many years ago, when she was a very little child ; but you, Mr. Smythe, you are not a relatif, I know, yet you were alone with her last efening. Ah ! it may be you are her husband, then.’

Charley coloured to the roots of his hair, and sighed.

'Lord! I just wish I was,' he said, with great frankness.

'You are *not* her husband! *saperlotte!* What have you done there together, then?'

'See here, my friend, I don't think you have any right to ask that question, and I only answer it because I choose to do so,' said Smythe, warmly; 'but if it will do you any good to know that I escorted Miss Summerfield to Mrs. Brophy's house last evening, and that she was present when you called, you are quite welcome to the information.'

'I thank you much. But why has she desire to see Mrs. Brophy?'

'You ought to know. She could have had but one object. She wants to find her father.'

M. Mivart gave a perceptible start.

'She thinks, then,' he said, 'that Mrs. Brophy can give her some information upon the subject?'

'She thinks that if she can obtain Mrs. Warren's address, she will undoubtedly succeed in her purpose. She feels sure that the two are now together.'

'Yes, yes; I understand you perfectly now.'

She went to Mrs. Brophy for to get this address, and has failed to do it. She asked for it, without doubt, and Mrs. Brophy, I presume, could not accord to her request,' said M. Mivart, with the same uneasy smile.

Charley felt his colour rising as he answered:

'No, oh no; I won't say that. You see, I wasn't there myself, exactly, but I know you spoiled her chance; you dropped in so damned accidental-like; and then Mrs. B—— had to go off in one of those things women have. I say, Mivvert, you must have frightened her, you know. What was it all about, any way?'

M. Mivart smiled again.

'Oh, well; she thinks, when I came, it was a—what is it? a corpse, a *revenant*, a—a—ghost, that is it, and she fainted herself away. This is why it was so—like that. Last year—you know it, perhaps—there was a—a *faillite*—a smash—a big bank go up in the air—*sauté*—everyting gone. Well, all my money was there. I hear the *bruits*, the—the rumours, but I do not achieve to get out my money. Well, to myself I said. "It is finished. If one loses his milk, no use to cry." So I take a ticket for Australia, and write to Mrs. Brophy that I go and dig for gold. But a

friend, he say, "Gold ! Pooh ! it's all sheeps down there ; don't you go,"—and so I don't, and the ship makes a wreck, and swallows itself up, and Mrs. Brophy thinks I am a—a *noyé*—dead man—and had fear when I came to the door.'

'Jove ! I don't wonder at it. Is she a relative of yours, Mivvert ?'

'Well, yes ; oh yes, she is my half sister. When my father died my mother moved to England and marries an Englishman—Parker his name was.'

'Yes, yes, I see. Here, Johnny' (to the waiter), 'bring a lemon, please, and hold on a minute ! What will you drink, Mivvert ?' Some bitter ? All right, so'll I. Two pints, Johnny, with a head on. Your sister, eh, Mivvert ? Well, she appears to have lots of stamps.'

M. Mivart raised an oyster to his mouth, laid down his fork, and stroked his moustache a moment, without answering ; then he said :

'You haf sharp eyes, Mr. Smythe, much better than mine, for I did not see you this morning in the Bank.'

'And they call these things oysters,' said Charley, contemptuously. 'Just look at that one, Mivvert. A shirt-button, a pea, a

Holloway's pill; pooh! I beg your pardon, though; what did you say? At the Bank?' Oh yes, I was there; and you didn't fare badly, eh, old man? Let's see; one fifty, three twenties, four tens, and ten fives; I think that's right.'

M. Mivart made a calculation, and then shrugged his shoulders.

'I concede it; my sister is enough rich to lend her brother two hundred pounds.'

'And her husband doesn't at all object, I suppose?' said Charley, in a general way.

'Well, sir, I am not—what you call it? a Yankee. I haf no lof of asking questions.'

'So much the worse for you, then, if you want to get on in the world,' said the imperturbable Charley; 'but what *I* can't make out, Mivvert, is this. The old man last night hadn't the remotest idea that it was you who raised the devil there with his missis, and *she* swore it was a tramp. Now, Mivvert, I'm a bit of a fool in a good many things, I know, but darn me if that wasn't a queer performance, anyhow.'

M. Mivart began to scowl.

'It does seem to me,' he said, 'that we are losing ourselves away from the point. At first you demand if I will aid you to resolve

a mystery. Well, of course I say yes, I don't mind ; but, if you please, I should wish to know *how* ; will you haf the goodness to tell me that ?'

'You're right,' said Charley, heartily ; 'you're right ; biz *is* biz. Well, in the first place, what has become of Mr. Summerfield ?'

Angry blood leaped to M. Mivart's face.

'I haf already answered to that question.'

'Not out and out you haven't, and I don't for one instant suppose you are afraid to do it either.'

'Affraid !'

The idea was so diverting that M. Mivart regained his good humour at once.

'You amuse me, sir ; a Frenchman has never fear, not even of his wife, as you Yankees haf. I know nothing about Mr. Summerfield.'

'Couldn't tell for a ten-pound note whether he is dead or alive, I suppose ?' and Charley thought that M. Mivart paled a little before answering.

'No, sir.'

'Never heard, of course, about his eloping with Mrs. Warren ?'

'Never ; but it might easily arrive, such a thing as that. She was ravishing, this

woman, and I belief to haf seen them together many times in Amboy.'

'You know Mrs. Warren, then?'

'Oh yes; but unfortunately not to speak.'

'She knows *you*, of course.'

'Ah! no; the Fates were not so good for me as that.'

Charley looked a little disconcerted.

'Well, your sister would know all about it, if any elopement did take place—eh, Mivvert?'

'I should belief so—yes.'

'And she wouldn't have any motive in concealing it from Martha, of course?'

M. Mivart shrugged his shoulders.

'Why, I do not see.'

'And would be perfectly willing to give her Mrs. Warren's address, I suppose?'

'Again why not, if she knows it?'

'Sure enough, that's what *I* say; but suppose, Mivvert—just suppose—that she *won't* give it up—women are so thundering queer at times, you know—there isn't any reason in the world, of course, why *you* should not obtain it for the young lady?'

'I should do so with pleasure. How can I communicate with her? Where does she lif?'

'In old Brophy's brewery.'

Again there was a sudden rush of blood to the stranger's face.

'She is poor, perhaps, then?'

'No, oh no.'

'Then why is she there? I do not understand it,' and M. Mivart looked with such manifest suspicion at Charley, that the latter felt he had gone a step too far and must shift his ground.

'Well, I don't know exactly; some nonsense or another about painting a picture of the meadows down there, I believe. But I say, Mivert, while I think of it—didn't you know her mother?'

An ugly scowl gathered at once over the stranger's face.

'Stop!' he said, in a tone of decision; 'for one day, sir, you haf asked enough, and I haf answered enough'; then, suddenly remembering his nationality, he smiled, so that every tooth glistened beneath his moustache, and added, 'Pardon, sir, that I *ref*fuse you; but there are some things of which sometimes we never speak—that is *why* I have *ref*fused.'

'Umph!' said Charley; 'all right, old man; and catching a glimpse of the clock over the door, he hastily added, 'hallo! what! as late as that! why, I've got to meet Miss Summer-

field at Blanchard's at two—here, waiter, how much? and I say, Mivvert, give us your address, and I'll drop in on you and have another chat some day.'

Without any seeming hesitation, M. Mivart wrote the name of an hotel in Gerrard Street upon a card, and gave it to him.

Charley thrust it and the change of a sovereign into his pocket, and rising, extended his hand.

'Good-bye, old fellow,' said he, 'and remember your promise about the address. Between us all, we shall get to the bottom of this mystery yet.'

When the door had closed upon him, M. Mivart knit his brows and chewed the end of his moustache for several minutes in deep thought. Then he turned sharply round, and called for pen, ink, and paper. When these were brought, he wrote the following in great haste :

'MY DEAR LYDIA,

'I have just come to know a curious news. The young lady I met in your infernale village last evening—it is Martha, and you know well what that signifies;—this is exactly my luck; these things always arrive for me;

I cannot help it, but I will tell you how it was. You remember that Smythe—that boy who made himself an apparition to us one day, under the trees into Amboy? Well, an hour ago, as I read my newspaper here in a *café*, he enters, strikes me on the arm, and says “Haillo, Mivart!” so I raise up my ears at that, and he continue, “you know me; I am Mr. Smythe, from Amboy; please tell me if Mr. Summerfield has run away with Mrs. Warren; and where is her address? Martha, she very much wants to know this, and she lives in that old fool’s brewery down in that pig of a village, Deadwick.” Of course Martha came down there for that, and what has become off your nose then, that she can come under it without you knowing it? You must see her immediately and say, “My brother write that you want Mrs. Warren’s address; why did you not come to me and ask?” and then give her a wrong address with much pleasure. That will be the best way; and mind that you are clever and tell a consistent story, for you know well that so long as Martha is kept from Mrs. Warren, Mr. Summerfield can never be off trouble for us. You do not like, perhaps, that Martha should find you out in that hole down there;

you did not marry the big animal for that, eh? Well, it is pity; but she is right. Cheat her as you like, but do not make her any harm, *ma gaillarde*, or we shall pull each other by the ear.

‘Your devoted

‘AUGUSTE.’

When he had posted this, M. Mivart lighted a cigar, and sauntering off in the direction of Regent Street, was just in time to see Martha and Charley come out of Blanchard’s and enter a hansom.

‘Mon Dieu! what a woman she has turn out to be!’ he admiringly exclaimed, as he stood rooted to the spot and watched them pass; ‘and how the old poosey cat will make a fine noise, when she know she has been tracked by the lofly little beggar.’

CHAPTER III.

THIN ICE.

WHEN Smythe, at the dinner-table, had related to the minutest detail what had occurred in his interview with M. Mivart, Martha felt the sum of her perplexities increased to a very appreciable extent. Sifting and analysing what knowledge she now possessed of the stranger, she conjured up terrible possibilities of unknown evils, and otherwise destroyed her appetite in an effort to understand a mystery in which it was clear this stranger and her mother had played the leading rôles. His admission that he was a Frenchman would have seemed pleasantly confirmatory of her theory that he was a relative of her mother's, had he not claimed kinship with Mrs. Brophy. That took all the colour out of her hopes, and even damped the fires of her resentment for a time. Could

it be possible that the woman she was so relentlessly hunting down was a near relative, a sister perhaps of her wronged and much-suffering mother? It might be! for the world is full of such anomalies, and few of us are sure that we are not bound by hidden ties to some unloved object. But the fact that Smythe had never seen Lydia Parker and her mother together would seem destructive to such a theory as this;—a theory to which it was equally impossible to adjust another fact, viz., that the two patronymics Dessart and Parker were, when the least was said, dissimilar. Turn the subject about in her mind as she would, it was always a *fagot d'épines*, and always unseizable. It was clear now that Mr. Palmer's perspicacity had thrown a dark-lantern gleam among the intangibilities of the business, and revealed a phantom which she would be very sorry to meet face to face. There was evidently a grim, practical tenacity of purpose in this man, which would not stop short until the cover had been lifted from the whole precious mystery, and whatever dead bones and ashes it contained had been laid bare. It was a gratifying circumstance, in any case, that *she* had inserted the opening wedge into the secret herself, and had whis-

pered the shibboleth which was to give ingress into long-closed and mayhap ghost-haunted chambers. The result might be terrifying ; but a little terror once in a while in a monotonous existence is so much like the savour of a condiment to a cloyed palate, that in it might be found a stimulus to fresh and needed exertion. In any case, it were better that it came quickly and were over ; for, after all, there is no pain to equal the tension of a great suspense. The heartache is bad enough, but it is only the minor note of the greater distress, the brainache.

One consequence of the incipient development of this disorder in Martha was that, during the latter half of the homeward journey, she became downright irritable. Charley could elicit nothing but stings from her waspship, and, finding a good deal of sameness in the business, gave it up at last and openly sulked. He was even irreverent enough to say, ' Thank God ! ' when Limeborough station was finally reached.

As they turned into the High Street, whom should they meet, face to face, but Lottie Cadmus.

The blood flew at once to the very tips of Charley's ears.

‘Hello, Lottie!’ he said, ‘hello!’ and then, recovering his equipoise, turned and introduced the two girls to each other. He was delighted with the extreme cordiality of their greeting, not knowing what was then going on in the girls’ minds.

Thought Lottie :

‘And this is the wonderful creature, is it! —wearing diamonds, a gold necklace, and a corded silk upon a railway journey! No fear of such peacock vanity as that mewing itself up in a country rectory. As if all that would divert attention from her bad figure, too.’ (Lottie having a very fine figure, you will remember.) ‘Surely Dexter has eyes and can see. It is certain he will never care anything for her.’

All this in the space of one second.

Meanwhile, Marty thought :

‘Gracious, what a plain girl, all figure and nothing else! That is not the sort of thing to commend itself to a man of Mr. Dexter’s taste and refinement.’

This, in the space of half a second.

Then Lottie spoke, with the sweetest smile in the world :

‘And so you are Charley’s old friend? How delighted you must be to see him again!’

Martha looked the very picture of amiability as she returned :

‘ Oh dear no ! You cannot conceive what a nuisance he is. I hope you will always keep him at home, Miss Cadmus.’

‘ Not much she won’t,’ said Charley, thinking—the simpleton—that she meant it all as a joke. ‘ No, no ! especially when a certain reverend gentleman is expected at the house, which, I am afraid, is very often indeed.’

For a random shot, however, this proved to be very effective. Martha, very much nettled, gave him a vixenish look—which he missed—lucky fellow !—and then made a lame and impotent attempt at raillery.

‘ Oh yes !’ she said, ‘ I’ve heard that Miss Cadmus has a weakness for the cloth.’

‘ I do not deny it,’ said the other frankly.

Whereupon, Martha could not find anything better to say than that ‘ for her part she could not endure a clergyman.’

‘ Nor can I, by George !’ said Charley heartily.

A downright murderous look sped from Martha’s eyes, as she turned and faced him.

‘ Nobody asked your opinion, sir ; and your cousin will not care to hear you speak in a disrespectful manner of her friends.’

‘Oh, as for that,’ said Lottie, still smiling, ‘he *may* have his reasons, Miss Summerfield, and so I am not disposed to quarrel with him yet.’

Shot number two. All the sweetness had disappeared from Martha’s face. In another instant the smile upon her lips would have surely soured—when, Mr. Cadmus, turning the corner, suddenly bore down upon them, and the circulation of the amenities was at once restored.

Fifteen minutes later, Charley and Martha were alone upon the Limeborough meadows.

‘Well, how do you like my cousin?’ he asked.

‘Oh, so-so!’

‘Pooh! she is a thousand times too good for that Dexter!’

‘You always couple her name with his. I suppose it would be quite impossible for him to prefer another woman?’

‘See here, Marty. Do you know, I believe you are getting fond of that man!’

This, of course, increased her irritation at once.

‘I am not,’ she answered, ‘though I presume I could do so without receiving any dictation from you upon the subject.’

‘Oh yes! you are your own mistress, Marty, I know that; but it is hard to see your inclinations going out to a fellow who, I am sure, cares nothing for you.’

‘*Quite* sure, I suppose?’

‘Well, he may have a passing fancy; your pretty face——’

‘Do not be stupid.’

‘I am not; your pretty face, I say, may have attracted him, as it would thousands of men. But I tell you, Marty, he is not a good sort of fellow at all; and I believe that he cares much more for Lottie’s money than for Lottie herself. His first thought is of Thomas Dexter, and Thomas Dexter’s interests; so don’t flatter yourself without good proof of it that he has fallen, or is likely to fall, in love with you, a needy artist, so far as he knows anything to the contrary.’

‘What do I care whether he falls in love with me or not!’ exclaimed Martha with increased petulance.

‘Well, I hope you don’t, Marty. It would be very hard, indeed, if you were so utterly to despise my love and devotion as to listen to this man. I can’t use grand words and high-sounding phrases, and, indeed, I don’t see that there is any particular virtue in them,

nor that love is any the better or stronger for rolling your eyes, and wearing your hair long, and playing guitars under your sweetheart's window at night. Such things are done on the stage, I know ; but they never impressed me as being just the right sort of thing, and I *couldn't* do it anyhow. I can only say, here I am, Marty, and if you really feel that it will do you good to see me break the ice in the river there, and take a header into the water'—they were now crossing the meadows—'I will do it at once, idiotic as such a thing would be. If you are sick and want me to nurse you, I'll sit up until I can't see any longer ; if you want me to go to America on any business, I'm off by the first train to Liverpool, though that would be the hardest task of all. I love you, Marty ; you are precious to me above everything else in the whole world. I thought I loved the governor, and so I did—God bless him !—but if your death could have saved his life do you think I would have said the word ?—ah well ! perhaps *that* is wicked—but you know what I mean, Marty. I am not educated as you are ; I don't pretend to have the head you have got, and I don't want it. One head is good enough in a family, and I am sure I've got

heart to go all around and to spare. Why, I wouldn't care if you had a thousand aunts and cousins and grandmothers. If you wanted me to help them, I'd be proud to do it, and if you wanted 'em in the house I'd build a big wing to it and send for the whole family to come—the more the merrier—and you know I would. Oh! Marty dear, please *don't* discourage a fellow so; say just one comforting word, and if you think it will add any force to what I have said if I kneel, I'll do it right here, and let you walk over me too, if that would please you better.'

'See here, Charley Smythe, don't make a fool of yourself,' said Martha brusquely; 'the idea of your flopping like Mrs. Cruncher out here on the Limeborough meadows! I couldn't think of such a thing! After that long speech of yours, too!'

Charley, recoiling from that dash of ice-water, gave a deep sigh, and made no answer. They had reached the bridge by this time. The chameleon began to change its colour again.

'Now run back, that's a dear. I don't care about the people seeing you enter the village with me; come, that's a good fellow,' then, as she perceived two big tear-drops rolling down

his face, she added, in downright honest tones, 'Charley, you are the best and dearest boy in the world; can't you see that I am trying very hard to love you? Come here, you big baby,' and she took her handkerchief from her pocket and wiped his eyes. Then she kissed him on the cheek.

'There! but what are you doing? let me go, sir.'

But no; Charley in his elation had seized her round the waist, and was indisposed to relinquish his hold.

'Let me go,' she cried; 'that is always the way with a man. Put out your hand to be shaken, and it is squeezed into a pulp; chance to look at him, and he begins to show every tooth in his head.'

'I should like to catch anybody trying it on, that's all,' said Charley with emphasis.

'There, there, then, let me go, and you may walk just a little further,' said Martha, conscious of the necessity of some concession.

Charley released her at once. His face was fairly transfigured with joy.

'You just are the *darlingest* little girl, if'—he added reflectively—'if it will only last, Marty.'

She laughed.

‘Oh! you sceptic; no, no, not that way,’ as Charley was about to cross the bridge, ‘let us walk along the path, I can cross upon the ice further up.’

‘Will it be safe?’

‘Oh yes! I saw somebody skating as we came along,’ she said colouring; ‘but, Charley, I was just about to say, don’t you know what a variable creature a woman is?’

‘Oh! don’t I!’

‘Well, don’t shoot out your words as though your tongue was a catapult; you see, Charley, if a woman was pitched in a single key, like some pieces of music, she would be simply odious; why, I suppose an oyster, even, has its moods—a female oyster, I mean. We girls are all like a piece of shot-silk, Charley, and the men would detest us if we were otherwise. That is why the moon is called a she—did you know that? She is never two nights the same. Now, don’t interrupt; and I don’t care about being compared to the moon either, though there is one thing to be said about her, after all; she is the one female in the broad universe that, subject to laws, obeys them; and as for your odious sex, why, the most dreary and desolate region in the

world is up at the pole, where the sun shines incessantly for six months in the year; that is masculine persistency, if you will !

By this time they were nearly opposite Mr. Brophy's house, when Martha suddenly stopped, extended her hand, and added :

‘ I must cross here—go back now and ponder upon what I have told you.’

‘ Let me cross with you first,’ he pleaded ;
‘ the ice may be thinner than you suspect.’

‘ Nonsense, nonsense—run along now—I wouldn't be seen with you to-night by any of the Brophy family for the world, and *you* should know why, Charley.’

‘ Well, then, if I must, I must,’ he rejoined, with a grimace ; ‘ but I impose one condition.’

‘ Well ?’ and she knew by his eyes what was coming.

‘ A kiss ! just one—a little sisterly one.’

‘ Gormand, you have already had one.’

‘ Which justifies another. Come, now, I won't budge an inch until you do.’

‘ Charley, this is not a bit kind.’

‘ Just one *little* one.’

‘ You simpleton, there ! Right about, now ! forward—march !’

‘ Good-bye, Marty, until to-morrow.’

‘To-morrow—yes.’

He took a few steps, and stopped.

‘Run! run!’ she cried.

‘Are you sure it is safe?’ he answered.

She stepped down the bank, and stood upon the ice.

‘All right,’ stamping upon it with her foot. ‘You see. It is solid as a floor. Good-bye,’ and waving her hand, she started across.

Charley resolved, in spite of her injunction, to wait until she should reach the opposite bank. About midway, she turned and motioned him to go on. Almost at the same instant she slipped, screamed, and disappeared through a great black opening in the surface.

He ran back immediately, seizing on the way upon a plank, which chanced to lie beside the path, and which he dragged down the bank and upon the frozen river.

Within ten seconds he had reached the edge of the hole. Ice had been cut and taken thence the day before, and during the night, a film, stout in appearance, but insufficient to bear any serious weight, had formed over the treacherous opening.

Nothing was visible but a churned up pool

of black water, in which sheets of ice, like broken window glass in shape and consistency, were floating. He pushed the plank across the hole, flung off hat, coat and boots, and slid feet first into the water.

The cold was terrible, and went straight to the marrow of his bones. He was in mid-channel, and the current, running strongly in the direction of Limeborough, seized upon him, tilting his body upwards, so that for a moment he seemed glued against the lid of ice above. Then he suddenly dropped, and found himself in the soft mud at the river bottom, where he groped about a moment in vain in the turbid water, and was then drawn up like a cork to the steel-black crust of ice again, upon which his fingers slipped and scraped in the attempt to obtain a hold. This was a dangerous position to be in, and it was only by a supreme effort—so cramped and benumbed had his limbs become—that he succeeded in once more reaching the bottom. Here he felt right and left among the river-weeds, unable to see but a few inches before him and conscious that he was drifting farther and farther away from the hole, and would soon be sucked up to the surface again.

He had encountered no object as yet, and his position was beginning to be critical in the extreme. He had already swallowed considerable water, and was fast becoming exhausted, when he thought, 'She must have gone down with the current.' So, letting his body swing upward with the tide, he struck out vigorously, and ran head first into a mass of flowing drapery. And now his chilled veins began to beat, and his limbs grew supple and strong again.

With one arm about her unconscious form, he faced the swift current and fought his way back with the other—inch by inch, foot by foot—now pushing against the bottom and rising in an oblique line toward the hole, now swimming with might and main, though burdened with her weight and impeded by her clinging drapery, but always steadily gaining, until suddenly a red glow, rimmed with black and kindled by the setting sun, appeared in the water above him. When, with a supreme effort, Charley rose with his burden through the broken ice and into the living world again, he looked up and found Dexter—of all men—standing by the opening.

'Quick!' gasped Charley; 'take hold of

her, I'm nearly gone! Lift her out—I can manage, somehow, to crawl up myself!

Dexter, who had just removed a pair of skates, threw himself at once upon the ice, stretched forth his hand and pulled her into an angle, where, by standing with one foot upon the plank and the other upon the ice, he succeeded at last in lifting her from the water. He immediately wrapped her in his overcoat.

‘Is she alive?’ cried Charley, still in the river, and still gasping for breath.

‘I can hardly tell,’ said Dexter, ‘she seems very stiff and cold.’

‘For heaven’s sake, don’t say that! Rub her hands, man—rub and slap her hands!’

But before Dexter did this, he placed his hand upon her heart and felt it feebly beating.

‘It’s all right,’ he said; ‘she’s not dead!’

‘Thank God!’ said Charley fervently. Then he pulled himself up by the plank, and crawled out upon the frozen surface. As he staggered up to where Martha lay, Dexter said:

‘It would be well for you if you got up a little circulation. Can you manage to run over to Brophy’s and bring some brandy for her?’

Charley, thinking of Marty's injunction as to the Brophys, asked, with his teeth all in a chatter :

‘ Is there nowhere else I can get it?’

To which Dexter answered :

‘ Yes ; at the farmhouse yonder, past the bend in the river. It is but a step. It will not take you a minute.’

Whereupon, Charley threw his coat across his shoulders, pulled on his boots, and ran as well as his stiffened limbs would permit in the direction indicated.

When he disappeared from view, Dexter, noting signs of returning consciousness, immediately took Martha in his arms ; so that when she opened her eyes she found herself in a very novel and interesting position. Failing to understand it however, she scrambled, the forlornest of spectacles, to her feet, and gazed rather stupidly at the reverend gentleman.

‘ Thank God,’ said he, ‘ that you are saved !’

Then it all flashed upon her in a moment : Mr. Dexter had saved her life !

‘ I see—I understand it all now ; and I am so grateful!——’ she commenced, when nausea supervened, and she could only gasp at

intervals. 'I am very ill : I shall surely die! Take me home. Oh! Mr. Dexter, what *shall* I do?'

So, of course, there was nothing left for the astonished parson to do but to half lead, half carry her to the river's bank, where Mr. John Brophy, returning home from the brewery, suddenly appeared upon the scene.

When poor Charley came back with the brandy—stiff, cold, his teeth in a chatter, and his clothes frozen upon him—both Martha and Dexter had disappeared. He looked up and down the sheeted river, looked at the desolate causeway—now lying stark and cold in the dying light ; looked, with a look of blank dismay, over the great black fen-like expanse of naked meadow-land about him. Not a single human being was visible within the whole sweep of the horizon, and he felt for a moment a terrible soul sickness come over him. Then he uttered a savage oath, and angry blood quickly thawed his clogged and frozen veins as he thought : ' Has Dexter played a trick upon me ? ' But no—he would not do the man such an injustice as that. He (Dexter) had, probably, thought it best to take her at once to Mr. Brophy's house. In any case, he would go there and ascertain.

In answer to his summons the servant said :

‘ Oh yes, sir ; the parson brought her here, sir, an’ she’s very ill. Mr. Brophy’s gone for a doctor, sir.’

‘ Well, I’d like to see her a moment,’ said Charley ; ‘ I have brought her some brandy.’

‘ Oh, she’ve had some, sir ; an’ the parson says as she mustn’t, on no account, be disturbed to-night. I’m sorry, sir, but them’s my orders.’

It was of no use for him to rave and swear and ‘ go on,’ as he did, for several minutes. The servant was sorry, but inexorable ; and the poor fellow was obliged at last to give it up, and creep—the forlornest of spectres—over the road to Limeborough.

His first care, upon his arrival there, was to find a tailor’s slop, where, not wishing to appear before his uncle in such a bedraggled condition, he purchased an entire change of dress.

It was here that his attention was first called to a piece of blue ribbon which had got entangled with his own scarf. It was not much, to be sure ; but the tailor observed that he folded it up and put it away with as

much care as though it had been a thousand-pound note.

He next went to the Dolphin and Magpie, where, in order to expel the frost from his bones, he took more whisky than was strictly good for him. The unfortunate consequence of this was that, later in the evening, he was upbraided by his uncle, who knew nothing of his heroic conduct of the afternoon, for getting tipsy and misconducting himself in the presence of strangers at dinner-time :—such being, it is to be feared, the nature of much of the justice the world accords to its bravest men.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SOMNAMBULIST.

DEXTER was scrambling up the river-bank, among the osiers and elder-bushes, with his burden, when, hearing the sound of nearing footsteps, he looked up and saw Mr. John Brophy upon the causeway. Martha had gone off in a dead faint again.

‘Stop, please!’ he cried.

The brewer paused in astonishment, then dashed down the slope.

‘My word, sir; what has happened here?’ said he, subduing his usual fortissimo to a whisper, as his eyes fell upon and recognised the limp figure in Dexter’s arms.

‘Miss Somers has broken through the ice and she is very much exhausted; may I carry her to your house?’

‘May you!’ repeated John, with a look of reproach, ‘what a question, sir! Given her

to me, Mr. Dexter; you mun be worn out. I'm the stronger o' the two, and your clothes are all in a drip.'

'Oh! I can manage it very well, thank you.'

'Nay, nay,' and John insisted upon lifting her in his stalwart arms, and led the way up the embankment. They had but a short distance to walk, as the house was but a hundred yards away. At the gate, Martha suddenly opened her eyes, and gave a great start as she recognised the Deadwick brewer.

'Oh! is it you, Mr. Brophy?' she asked in a bewildered manner. 'And you are there, too, Mr. Dexter?'

'Yes. Mr. Brophy kindly offered to carry you.'

'He were fagged out, poor man,' explained John; 'not that he wanted to give you up, one bit, not he; but I insisted on't, you see, and now you mun come in t'house, and drink summat warm; for you mun be chilled to the very heart.'

'Oh no! please, if you will put me down I can walk very well, I am sure, and the cottage is not very far.'

'Nay, nay,' said John, kindly, 'you mun

bide wi' us to-night. I'll run to the cottage mysen, and send the maid wi' dry clothes, for 'tis a distressing state y'are in, my poor gell.'

'Oh, I'd much rather go,' she pleaded.

Then Dexter took one of her hands in his, and said :

'Do not be absurd. You have had a terribly narrow escape, and you incur a great risk by remaining here in this biting wind. See, you are all in a shiver. Your lips are blue, and your face is pinched and corpse-like. If you care to please me, you will enter at once.'

She raised her eyes to him and smiled faintly.

'I would do anything to please you, Mr. Dexter—it is your due. Take me in, Mr. Brophy, but let me walk. I can do it, I assure you, with the aid of your arm.'

And in this wise they reached the door of the house.

Mrs. Brophy, when summoned, was greatly astonished at the dripping apparition she found in the passage : Martha's hair was glued down upon her face, and trailed in a stringy mass upon her back ; a great splash of river-mud was upon her bosom—her dress was torn in places—her forehead was bruised,

probably from contact with a stone at the river's bottom; and she otherwise presented a most distressing spectacle, at sight of which whatever was good in Mrs. Brophy's nature was immediately stirred.

'Have a fire made in the spare chamber, Lyddy, and the wet things mun come off at once, and she, poor gell, put to bed in warm blankets,' said John. 'She tried to cross the river on th' ice, you see, when it broke in like a pie-crust, and she'd ha' been drowned! sure, but for the parson here, God bless him. Now, run quick, there, Mary, an' kindle the fire; an', Lyddy, you an' Mr. Dexter lead her up stairs, while I fetch a drop of brandy and water.'

Martha was very weak, and reached the chamber with difficulty—slowly followed, as far as the door, by John with a decanter. Then Dexter said to him:

'It would be better to have a doctor, I think. She has received a great shock to her nervous system, which might lead to serious results if they are not averted in time. I would go for him myself, but I am wet and cold, and it would be as well if I changed my clothes at once. I'll thank you for a little brandy, too, if you do not mind.'

Whereupon John tapped on the door, and asked for the decanter and a glass.

‘An’ did ye gie her a good stiff drink, Lyddy?’ he demanded.

‘Yes; as much as she could swallow.’

‘That’s right; the parson wants a nip, you see, and he desarves it, too. Here you are, Mr. Dexter—take it neat, sir, it ull’ do you more good that way. An’ I believe what you say about the doctor. I’ll run after him mysen, an’ never fear, sir, but what the young lady ull be well taken care of.’

‘Thank you; I knew that, when I suggested she should be brought here,’ said Dexter, buttoning up his coat preparatory to departure. ‘And let me advise you as to one thing,’ he added, as his ear caught the jingle of a door-bell, ‘do not let her on any account be disturbed. Call your servant before she answers that bell—it may be a gentleman I met on the ice, and whom I sent for some brandy. She does not need it now, and he may be inquisitive, you see; tell her to say that Miss Somers cannot possibly be seen to-night.’

John immediately gave his instructions to the servant, when Dexter added:

‘You see, she needs rest more than any-

thing else this evening. Do not let her talk at all, Mr. Brophy, if you please.'

John assented, and shook him warmly by the hand. Good-night, sir, and God bless you. I allays like to feel the grip of a brave man's hand. Good-night, sir.'

In spite of her promise to Dexter, Martha felt a great repugnance to entering the chamber and submitting herself to the ministrations of Mrs. Brophy. But she was physically incapable of resistance, after all; and what seemed at the first blush to be a graceful deference to Dexter's wishes was in reality an act of downright necessity. Her weakness was extreme, and she could give but little assistance to Mrs. Brophy as the latter removed her mud-stained garments. And though the brandy revived her for a time, the heat of the room provoked a deadly nausea, which rendered her completely helpless. In this condition she was put to bed between warm blankets at last.

Katty was the first to arrive with a change of clothing. Then the doctor came; and Mrs. Brophy, hearing for the first time Martha's version of her misadventure, joined in the doctor's praises of Dexter's conduct.

'Humph! I did not think the parson had

so much pluck in him,' he said, when he had felt Martha's pulse and had opened his medicine-case — 'I did not really; but it only shows that a minister *can* be a man, after all, if he will, and is very damaging to a favourite theory of mine upon the subject.' Then, perceiving Martha suddenly lift her eyebrows, he added: 'Do not take my words too literally, miss; there is nothing oracular in them, I assure you; and I entertain the highest possible esteem for the cloth, when it is the right sort, at least.'

'What, then, did you mean, sir?' asked Martha faintly.

'Only that, in the pursuit of the study of human nature, one has his surprises, his disappointments, and his verifications of pre-conceived notions; that is all, miss.'

Which remark Martha found to be oracular in quite another sense, and held her peace.

'Our patient, Mrs. Brophy,' continued the doctor, 'is in no immediate danger. She appears to have an excellent constitution; and with a good night's rest, which this mixture will insure, she will, I think, be able to be about to-morrow. I will call during the afternoon, at all events, and see if any change in her symptoms has taken place.'

‘Not here, doctor, please,’ said Martha, with an abruptness and earnestness that caused the worthy man’s glasses to leap at once to the bridge of his nose.

‘And why, not here?’ he answered, attentively surveying her.

‘Because I do not wish it—it is not my home.’

‘A visitor, of course, however—a friend of Mrs. Brophy’s?’ he answered with great politeness.

‘Not at all. I live at the brewery cottage, in Deadwick, and you may call upon me there if you like.’

‘Ah, indeed! You are then the artist I have heard about, whom my respected but eccentric friend Perry has commissioned to paint a picture of the Limeborough meadows?’

A slight flush mounted to Martha’s temples as she answered:

‘Yes.’

‘Ah, a strange freak that of his! I shall see him soon, when I shall ask him the meaning of it. Just like him though!—he is a queer customer, is Perry; he carried a pair of skates in his knapsack when he went to Switzerland. He and his Creator only know why; for it was in August, and hissing hot at the time.

And then he had an idea that, in the teeth of Orcus and all the rest of the brimstone gods, he could descend into the bowels of Vesuvius in some kind of a fire-proof diving-bell, made of asbestos and mica; and I know that he once broke his leg in the attempt to fly from the ridge-pole of his barn on a sort of winged velocipede, which fell upon a sitting-hen and nipped in the bud a very promising family of Brahmas. Well,' he added, 'there is one thing about it, he can pay for his vagaries; and I should think a picture of our swamps, if not just the thing to hang on the line at Burlington House, should at least put a good sum of money into the artist's pocket. I shall call at the cottage, then, miss—I am not sure that I have heard the name.'

'Miss Somers.'

'Exactly; with your permission I will take a note of it.'

When he had done this and had expressed his opinion, at Mrs. Brophy's request, upon Vesuvius, Pozzuoli, Ischia, and 'The Last Days of Pompeii,' he took his departure, with a final injunction as to keeping his patient quiet, and the room at a uniform temperature through the night.

Mrs. Brophy immediately gave Martha

her draught, and left the chamber. Katty, remaining to fulfil the doctor's final orders, stretched herself out upon the hearthrug and watched the fire. Martha turned, with a sigh, on her side, when the sedative qualities of the medicine became at once manifested. In a few minutes she was breathing heavily.

It was past midnight, when she awoke in a profuse perspiration and with a sense of feeling decidedly better. She raised her head upon her arm, and saw Katty curled up like a kitten before the grate, and evidently asleep. The fire had burned down to a single coal, from which spurted at intervals a spire of yellow flame, giving dark-lantern effects to objects in the room. These she had barely noticed hitherto ; so she raised herself to a sitting position in the bed, and proceeded to take a survey of the chamber. It was large, and somewhat ostentatiously furnished. Above her, and rising to the ceiling, was a tester, crimson in hue, and a perfect marquee in size ; on each side were windows similarly draped. The mantelpiece, with mirror and lambrequin, was on the right as she lay. Opposite, were a door near the angle of wall, and a carved oaken press, from each panel of which a grotesque face stupidly leered.

On the left were a chest of drawers, a wash-stand, and—she had to lean quite over on that side to see it—a black travelling box.

Then, her curiosity being gratified, she threw herself back upon her pillow again, and lay watching the corpse-candle gleams flitting about the room and darting in and out among the roses and gillyflowers upon the wall-paper, and the ceiling all stippled in grey and yellow with fire shadows. At last she was startled by a sound like the scratching of claws upon the window-ledge; and listening, she recognised in it a trick of the wind among the chestnut-branches just outside the casement. But, somehow, it had affected her nerves, and she sat up once more and looked at Katty. The faithful creature had not changed her position, and the sound of her breathing was quite audible. That was reassuring. Were there occasion for it, she could awaken her in an instant. ‘Poor girl, though, if I *should* chance to fall asleep and the fire were to go out, she might suffer from the cold. I will get up quietly and put on some coals.’

She rose very gently and approached the grate; a few copper-hued cinders, with black and ragged edges, from which the saffron

tongues protruded now at rarer intervals, and licked at the bars, alone remained, and the room was nearly dark. So lifting a few of the larger coals without noise from the scuttle, she placed them within the grate, and, quickly retreating to the bed, lay and watched the result. There was almost a total obscuration and extinguishment at first, then thick wreaths of smoke, intertwined with threads of fire, commenced to mount the chimney. At this point, however, the scratching upon the window-ledge recommenced, and Martha sprang once more from the bed, threw back the curtains, and looked out upon the night.

‘It *must* be late,’ she thought, for no light shone from the lower windows into the garden, and it was with difficulty that she could just discern the black arms of the chestnut thrust out like antennæ by the force of the wind, and which, in scraping against the walls, had occasioned the mysterious sounds she had heard. Above, the whole sky appeared to be in motion; for gauze-like vapours, through which the stars shone dimly like sparks in smoke, were whirling swiftly northward, propelled by some high current of air. Then the window-sash rattled, and there flew screaming across the meadows, with a loud

whirr of wheels, a swift gleam of yellow light, in which she recognised the late express up to London. Whereupon, warned by a shiver, she once more crept into bed, and lay and watched the flames as they leaped from the incandescent coals and gradually illumined the whole chamber.

This, favouring a meditative mood, she began to reflect upon her narrow escape from an awful death. But for Dexter, where would her body be lying at this hour? Surely somewhere in that great icy coffin, with her limbs entwined in river weeds, and her face, perhaps, buried in river mud. What a terrible thought! And what a tie now existed between Dexter and herself; a tie impossible for her ever to sever, or break away from! And Charley! puling his weak sentimentalities into her ears, and shedding tears like a lass-lorn gaby—he was then a coward! He had run away from her in her hour of peril; his courage was but lip-deep, after all! And the amount of pity she had wasted upon him! It sickened her to think of it; and yet, were not all weak creatures to be pitied—sincerely pitied? For brave men the world reserves its *vivas* and laurel-crowns; for the chicken-hearted, if worthy in other things, condonation and pity.

For *all* men cannot be heroic. *Some* soldiers must be wounded in the back ; and doubtless many small souls rebel against themselves, and dream impossible dreams of personal suffering and achievement.

‘ Ah me ! ’ she thought, ‘ I *will* forgive him and pity him still.’

Had he been, in truth, as courageous and self-sacrificing as he professed to be, she might even have learned to love him. But such a thing *now* could never be. With the breaking up of the delusive river-ice had come the breaking to pieces of *that* pleasant delusion.

She had got thus far in her reflections, when she was startled by a clicking noise, like the turning of a latch ; and, looking up, she saw the door open slowly, and a tall figure, all in white—which she immediately recognised as Mrs. Brophy—appear upon the threshold.

Martha started up breathlessly, with parted lips. What could *she* want at such an hour of the night ? To adjust the fire, perhaps, or to see how she—Martha—was progressing. If so, however, why such careful shutting of the door behind her, and why—great heavens !—this lighting of a candle in a room by this

time in a perfect blaze of illumination ? Why did she seem so pre-occupied, and never so much as give a glance toward the bed ? She passed quite around Katty, and as she skirted the foot-board Martha looked her full in the eyes, and was astonished to perceive no expression in them, no looking to either right or left. Surely she must have seen her here, sitting bolt upright in bed ! She would shake the pillows. What ! no effect ? and the cold sweat burst out upon Martha's face. A cinder fell into the pan with quite a fracas. Surely she would hear that ! But no ; she walked straight to the oaken-press, placed a chair noiselessly beside it, and stepping up, reached over to the top of the press, and descended with something in her hand, with which she approached the black box. Martha, bending eagerly forward, and beginning vaguely to comprehend the phenomena of which she was the affrighted witness, saw her kneel beside the box, place the candle upon the floor, insert the key which she had taken from the press into the lock, and throw back the lid. Martha's blood ran cold. What hideous thing was now about to be brought to light ? She raised up her head to see. Some trumpery

pieces of old finery were thrown upon the floor : lace, ribbons, flowers—faded items of former bedizenments—a frayed and moth-eaten dress, books, letters, visiting cards. A strange enough medley, to be sure, but commonplace and reassuring. So Martha sat upright in bed—her heart beats now ceasing to be audible—prepared to see this new version of ‘*La Sonnambula*’ to the end. Then her courage froze again as the lanky Amina suddenly turned and looked at her with dead grey eyeballs. Did she really see her ? and in any case, how long could she endure that awful, stony, corpse-like stare ? In another moment she must surely shriek, or leap from the bed and fly from the ghostly chamber. Where was Katty ? why did she not waken ? If those stony eyes would *only* look another way. Ah ! at last ! and Martha sank panting upon her pillow, only to leap up again as the sleeping woman, stooping once more over the box, extracted from the very bottom a package of unmistakable United States Five-Twenty-Bonds and a bank-book.

At sight of these, Martha’s courage revived for the second time. It is only the supernatural that thoroughly benumbs a brave

heart. A phase of the practical had set in. Martha was 'herself again.'

A chair softly glided across the carpet and stopped with its back against the bed in such a way that Martha could look directly over the shoulder of its occupant. Curiosity prompted her at once to get up upon her knees—a position which enabled her to see indubitably set forth in sleek Bank of England caligraphy, that Lydia Brophy held at her disposal in that comfortable institution no less a sum than three thousand pounds sterling. Martha's eyebrows went up, her jaw fell, and then a strange smile illumined her hitherto solemn face, and she threw herself back with an anomalous feeling of content upon her pillow.

She was just in time—the play was nearly over—the somnambulistic influence was waning—bonds and book were placed once more in the box—gauds and frippery followed in confusion—the lid snapped down with a loud click once more—the chair glided across the carpet in the direction of the oaken-press, and again a white figure stepping upon it stretched up a long thin arm:—then there was a slip, and an exclamation of surprise.

Mrs. Brophy was awake !

The most critical moment of all had now come. Martha closed her eyes and listened breathlessly. There was an interval of silence, followed by a whiff of breath—the smell of extinguished candlewick, the sound of a cautious footstep advancing to the bedside, and then Martha felt a woman's face close to hers, and knew that the stony eyes had a meaning in their close scrutiny at last. At this moment a voice exclaimed :

‘What’s the matter, Lyddy ?’ and Martha, peering through a dense fringe of eyelashes, could see the brewer’s blowzy and tumbled head thrust in at the doorway.

‘Hush ! nothing !’ she said. ‘I thought she called and needed something.’

‘Is she asleep, then ?’

‘Hush !—yes.’

And, as Katty stirred, Mrs. Brophy hastily glided from the room, and closed the door behind her.

Katty rose, yawned, rubbed her eyes, replenished the fire, came over to the bedside and looked at her mistress ; then she curled herself up upon the rug again, and once more fell asleep.

The flames mounted higher and higher ;

the whole room was soon in a glow of yellow heat. Again Martha's eyes wandered over the roses and gillyflowers upon the walls, and over the stippled ceiling; again they fell upon the black box, and, sinking still lower, rested at last upon a small white object which lay, hitherto unperceived by her, upon the carpet. She leaped from the bed and picked it up. It was a visiting-card, which the stony eyes had overlooked, and it bore this name and address :

‘ MRS. WARREN,
‘ HAYDON VILLA,
‘ CAMDEN ROAD, N.’

And then, in her elation, Martha came to the conclusion that there might be a Providence, after all, in thin ice. With that, she too fell asleep and dreamed pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. BROPHY EXPLAINS.

WHEN Martha again opened her eyes, the sun was shining brightly through the parted curtains, and Mrs. Brophy, with an open letter in her hand, was standing beside her.

Martha started up in confusion, her mind as yet in a tumult of awakening recollections.

‘Oh, it’s you, Mrs. Brophy! I have overslept myself; it must be very late?’

‘It is just ten o’clock. Do you feel better?’

Martha’s faculties were now sufficiently under control to perceive something unusual in her visitor’s manner.

‘Oh, very much so, thanks! I will get up at once, for I am quite strong again. Where is Katty?’

‘She is having her breakfast, and will

shortly return with yours. Is there anything I can get you ?'

'Nothing whatever, I thank you ;' and Martha made a movement upon the pillow, which, translated into words, distinctly said, 'That will do ; now please leave the room.'

To her surprise, however, Mrs. Brophy pulled up a chair to the bed-side, and, affecting a tone of sternness and deliberation, said :

'Miss Summerfield.'

For once in her life, Martha's assurance entirely forsook her. The woman she despised had stolen a march upon her. She was detected, a spy in the enemy's camp. She ground her teeth, and dug her fingers into the bedclothes.

There was just the faintest flicker of content upon Mrs. Brophy's lips as she added :

'Your name *is* Summerfield, is it not ?'

Martha flung all further disguise to the winds.

'Yes, it is ; and yours is or was Lydia Parker. And now that we know each other at last, let me ask you one simple question—what has become of my father ?'

Since all barriers had at length been broken down between her and this woman, there was

but one question for her to ask, and she had asked it.

Mrs. Brophy's bloodless face caught fire an instant, as a marble one might in a gleam of lightning ; then its pallor deepened. Her glances fluttered indecisively a moment over Martha's eager upturned face, and then concentrated in a troubled feline stare.

'I am surprised,' said she, 'very much surprised, at your goings-on here, Miss Summerfield. If I'd a been a kitchen-maid, or—or a Lucretia Borgia, you couldn't have treated me any worse.'

Martha puckered her forehead into two horizontal exclamation points.

'Not that it does you any credit, though,' continued Mrs. Brophy, waxing courageous ; 'and I'm sure it can't be a comfort for anybody to live under false pretences when it's sure to be found out ; and the pictures perhaps are only bought out of a shop, and the paints and the brushes and the bric-à-bracs.'

'Come, come, Mrs. Brophy, this is not answering my question ;' and Martha, in the toils, began to grow irritable, with a tendency to bite should occasion offer.

'Well, what brought you down here, in the first place ?'

‘To discover my father.’

‘And not to paint?’

‘And not to paint—NO.’

Again a glimmer of satisfaction hovered about Mrs. Brophy’s bloodless lips.

‘That is what my brother says. He writes me that he met your friend in London yesterday, who told him all about your business here. Now, why did you not be honest and come to me at once? Had you done so, I should have given you what little information I possess with the greatest pleasure.’

This staggered Martha, and perplexity for a moment got the better of her spite, until suddenly from Mrs. Brophy’s anxious eyes shot a revelation.

‘I see, she has crammed for this!—it’s a part she is playing. She is worried to death; she is all ice on the surface, and purgatorial flames within. I must be on my guard!’ Then she added aloud: ‘If it would afford you so much pleasure, why don’t you answer my question, then?—you are not afraid?’

‘Afraid!’ and Mrs. Brophy’s nose went up into an ugly sneer, which her eyes unmistakably belied. ‘This is some more of your lady-like treatment. What right have you

to ask me such a question?—your father was nothing to me.'

'I have the clearest right in the world,' said Martha warmly; 'for when he was last seen in Perth Amboy, it was in your company. As neither of you have returned to explain your prolonged absence, the presumption, as I take it, is that nobody is in a better position than yourself to answer my question.'

Mrs. Brophy brightened.

'Well, then, I have but a single reply to make. I do *not* know where your father is. I have not seen him for over six years. Again, I say, he was nothing whatever to me. Is there anything else, Miss Summerfield, you wish to know?'

Martha, conscious that her query had been answered, perhaps in its most liberal sense, now shifted her ground.

'You can express an opinion, at all events, Mrs. Brophy. I have a very decided one, to the effect that my father and Mrs. Warren are now living somewhere in England, or possibly upon the Continent, together; what do *you* think?'

Mrs. Brophy shrugged her shoulders, and did not immediately reply; whereupon Martha repeated:

‘Is that your opinion, or not, Mrs. Brophy?’

Again Mrs. Brophy shrugged her shoulders as she answered :

‘Possibly. I do not know.’

‘Ah ! now we are getting on,’ said Martha, with a malicious smile. ‘You admit, then, that my father accompanied Mrs. Warren and yourself to Europe.’

‘Certainly ; I have no cause for concealing the fact. I could have told you so a week ago, if you had been straightforward enough to ask me.’

Martha was evidently astonished at this unexpected display of frankness.

‘Then he *did* elope with her, after all !’ she exclaimed, in some excitement.

‘I have not said that there was any elopement, Miss Summerfield.’

Mrs. Brophy was not such a despicable antagonist, after all, it would appear. Nothing was more certain, in truth, than that, when vital issues were at stake, she could lay aside her affectations and smatterings, and parry with infinite shrewdness and cunning a counter-attack like the present.

‘What in the name of goodness *did* he do then ?—and what is your conception of an

elopement, anyhow?' demanded Martha, with a look of undisguised amazement.

Mrs. Brophy conjured up a compassionate smile, and said, putting her words in buckram for the occasion :

'You are talking to a woman, Miss Summerfield, and not to a child. Your father, I repeat, did *not* elope with Mrs. Warren. What has occurred since, I am not in a position to state. I can affirm, however, upon my word of honour, that up to the hour of our separation no act of impropriety ever passed between them, and that in their intercourse no suggestion or hint of such a thing was ever perceptible to me.'

Martha was perplexed by the rejoinder. There could be nothing impromptu in such rhetorical clear-starching as this. The subject had long since been carefully thought over, formulated, arranged, and put aside for an emergency like the present. Whatever statement Mrs. Brophy was about to make must be taken with a very liberal allowance of salt.

'*Why* did my father accompany you, Mrs. Brophy? And why surround your departure with such an air of mystery?'

'There was no mystery. The whole thing

was as plain and open as daylight. What I know, I will tell you freely, for I have no motive for concealment.'

But her eyes said otherwise, and Martha, noticing it, said curtly :

'Well, go on.'

Mrs. Brophy's eyes then had the appearance of swinging round in their orbits, as if to get a look at the lesson chalked up in her memory; then they returned to their former position, and she was about to continue when she suddenly checked herself.

'One moment, first,' she said, with just a flicker of colour in her face. 'Before I say anything more, I must impose upon you one condition.'

'Name it.'

'It's a trivial one—it is nothing in itself; but you see, Mr. Brophy believes that my brother's bones are now lying many fathoms deep in sea-water, and so I thought myself, until rat-tat came his old knock the other evening at the door, and frightened me nearly to death; of course, I had to go out to him, and the excitement—you know how it is—was altogether too much for me, and I fainted dead away. You know again what happened. I talked about a tramp, didn't I, or some-

thing of that sort? Well, we all have our little family secrets, Miss Summerfield, and my brother is not *exactly* the sort of man I should wish my husband to meet—that is all; and I should much prefer that you didn't mention him in Mr. Brophy's presence.'

'I see no particular harm in such a concealment,' said Martha.

'Harm! why, as I say, similar things occur in every family, and may even have occurred in yours, Miss Summerfield.'

Again Martha assented, though she did not exactly like the emphatic tone of the suggestion, adding, at a venture:

'You very rarely see your brother then, of course?'

'Oh, very seldom! I haven't laid eyes on him since that night, and the probability is, I shall not do so again for years.'

'Now,' thought Martha, with secret elation, 'she is lying to me, and I must be on my guard.'

Mrs. Brophy eyed her closely.

'Do you agree to the condition or not, Miss Summerfield?'

'Oh, certainly!' said Martha. 'Go on.'

'Well, then, the history of the matter is simply this: Mrs. Warren had determined to

sail for England upon a certain date (which I cannot now recall), and when your father learned of it, he proposed that we should go with him as far as—Pshaw! what *was* the name of the place?’ and Mrs. Brophy began to tap with her finger-nails upon the temple of memory.

‘Never mind, never mind!’ said Martha, impatiently.

‘Well, somewhere near New York—in his yacht; and so Mrs. Warren, knowing that it would please him very much—for she was quite fond of him, I think—gave her consent, and we sailed away from Perth Amboy one morning—we three—and just missed one of the most terrible storms ever known on that coast.’

‘Just missed it!’ exclaimed Martha.

‘Yes; oh yes; and a lucky enough thing it was, too, from the accounts we read of it in the evening papers.’

Martha sprang nearly out of the bed.

‘Look here, Mrs. Brophy!’ she said, ‘that yacht was upset in the storm, and I *know* it!’

A regular death’s-head grin appeared upon Mrs. Brophy’s face; her pallor deepened into a sickly green, her eyes leaped back, as if

from fright, in their sockets, as they encountered Martha's earnest gaze.

'Pooh!' she said; 'pooh!'

'But it *was*, I tell you, and was found floating bottom upward in the bay.'

'And yet *I* am here!' and a trickle of icy laughter came from Mrs. Brophy's lips.

'I see, I hear, and still I do not understand it; but go on.'

'Well, the weather was so bad when we arrived, that your father put the yacht in the charge of I don't know whom, some friend he met there, and accompanied us to New York.'

'To the St. Nicholas Hotel,' Martha submitted.

Mrs. Brophy made a pretence of reflecting a moment.

'Well, yes; I believe it was, though I am not much acquainted with American hotels—and during dinner he made up his mind to sail with us the next morning.'

'Oh, in order to be near Mrs. Warren, I presume?'

'He did not say so, at all events. He had money to invest in London, I believe, or something of that kind. I paid but little attention when he spoke of it, for it was no

business of mine ; I suppose the prospect of having company induced him to join us. So he wrote a few lines to your mother——'

'No he didn't ; or, at least, she never received them,' and Martha's eyes began to kindle.

Mrs. Brophy first lifted her bony shoulders, and raised her skinny palms in mute expostulation, then she smiled compassionately.

'I suppose I must overlook your rudeness, Miss Summerfield ; you are very young, you will learn better in time. I merely said that your father *wrote* the note ; he may not have *sent* it. I had no means of ascertaining, and certainly no motive for doing so. If it suited his purpose to anticipate his visit to England by a week, it was clearly his own affair.'

Martha's nose went up.

'I would not pretend, Mrs. Brophy, to dispute such an obvious fact ; proceed.'

Mrs. Brophy's spirits began to rise, her courage to thaw out. A terrible fog was slowly passing away from her mind. One by one her faculties got to work again.

'There is little else to say,' she went on ; 'we crossed the Atlantic, and as I have already told you, nothing of a nature to justify your suspicions occurred upon the

voyage. My impression at the time was that a strong feeling of friendship existed between them, and nothing more. I may have been mistaken—I am fallible, I know, and little versed in such things—still, as I say, that was my impression.'

'But what about Leamington, and *Venice*, and *Rome*, Mrs. Brophy?' and Martha, with a radiant face, threw down her ace of trumps.

Mrs. Brophy's thin lips curled.

'I am sorry I cannot answer you. I was in neither of the places you have been good enough to mention.'

'But your name was booked at the Duke of York's Arms, the Hotel Danielli and the Albergo della Minerva,' and Martha smiled as an icicle might.

'Those infernal registers!' thought Mrs. Brophy. Then aloud: 'Not mine, but my sister's. You see how easily it is to be mistaken. Mary Parker her name is. She is—let me see—she is now just twenty-five, four years younger than me, and she took my place as soon as I arrived at Liverpool. She met Mrs. Warren at the steamer. The situation was a good one, but I had to give it up to take care of my mother, which, you will agree, was only a child's duty, Miss Summer-

field ; and my sister has kept the place ever since.'

Astonishment burst from every pore in Martha's face.

'And you mean to tell me that you have not seen Mrs. Warren in six years?' she demanded.

'Is it six years! mercy on us, how time flies, Miss Summerfield. It seems but the other day that I left her in Liverpool.'

Martha bit her lips and reflected a moment.

'At all events, Mrs. Brophy,' she said at length, 'you must know where she has been living during this long interval.'

'Oh! you appear to know as much as I do about it, even more; for I was not aware that she had been to Venice. My sister never told me that.'

Martha clenched her fist, and felt the titillation of a bad word upon the tip of her tongue, which (heroic sacrifice!) she was forced to bite in two and swallow. Then she thought of the visiting-card beneath her pillow, and grew radiant again.

'Now I shall catch her,' she said to herself; and affecting—with little success—an air of indifference, she added aloud: 'She has

never lived in London then, I suppose, Mrs. Brophy ?'

The hook shone through the bait. Mrs. Brophy's eyes were not beautiful ; but they were keen : she saw it.

'Oh the young minx ! She has set a trap for me ; but let her catch me, if she can. In London ! Oh yes, certainly ; up in Camden Town, I believe. I have the address in the house, and will give it to you if you wish.'

'I am making a fool of myself !' thought Martha.

An awkward pause ensued. Then she spoke again :

'Thank you, Mrs. Brophy, very much ; does she live in Camden Town still ?'

'Oh, no ! She is at Nice at present. I received a letter from my sister the other day, and will show it to you if you like. I don't recall the name of the hotel, but it begins with a *G*—you might be able to tell by that. She is going to spend the winter there, I believe.'

At this point Katty entered, much to Mrs. Brophy's relief, with Martha's breakfast, and the interview came to an abrupt termination.

Two hours later, when Martha had left the

house, Mrs. Brophy sat down and wrote the following :

‘ MY DEAR AUGUSTE,

‘ I have had a terrible time with her ; and I am quite exhausted with the effort. She fell into the river last evening, and nearly lost her life. I wish she had—from the bottom of my heart I do. Be offended if you like. I do not care. It would have been a good job for both of us if she had perished. She was brought more dead than alive into this house, and slept here. It’s fortunate she did not die during the night, for in that case you would have said that I poisoned her. These stupid sentimental fancies will surely be your ruin yet. If so, do not say that I failed to warn you in time. I have told her that Mrs. W. is spending the winter at Nice. That will insure her immediate absence from Deadwick. I profess to know nothing about S., and it is scarcely probable that she will find him at Nice ; however, you know more about *his* whereabouts than I do, and will not discuss that very unlikely contingency. It may be necessary that I should see you soon, so keep me informed of your movements in case of urgent

need. Be careful how you spend that £200
—as I told you, I cannot spare you any more.

‘Your much perplexed

‘LYDIA.’

This letter was duly forwarded to M. Mivart
the same evening.

CHAPTER VI.

SOUVENT FEMME VARIE.

IT was a frosty morning. The sun shone, it is true, but as a diamond might—white and dazzling, without warmth, so that Charley Smythe, hampered with a bouquet of hot-house flowers and encumbered with various dainty edibles and potables for Martha, found it to be cold work waiting at the cottage door for her arrival.

He was in high spirits, however, or as much so as was consistent with his anxiety for Martha's health ; and this in itself was an effective antidote to the frost. It was a sweet consciousness that she would now feel under an obligation to him, such as would put an end to her hesitations and waverings, and ensure that perfect happiness for which he had so long and patiently waited. This was very selfish in him, of course, but in the

character of a true lover nothing else could very well be expected ; and then, too, he had no intention of making an obtrusive use of his advantage. After all, the service had been a paltry one, achieved at the cost merely of a wet skin and a sore throat, and he certainly would not thrust upon her a claim based upon such a trivial sacrifice of personal comfort as that ; besides, any stranger would have done the same thing from purely humane and disinterested motives, and it was certain that Dexter would have given his head for the opportunity *he* had so fortunately reaped. Still, Martha would be softened and subdued by her narrow escape from death, and being a woman, could scarcely fail to entertain a kind and tender feeling for her saviour. Then, too, as if it were a presage of a more perfect joy, she had been so kind to him upon the river-bank, had relaxed so much the accustomed superciliousness of her manner toward him. Oh yes ! she would be glad enough to see him now. How tenderly those great brown eyes of hers would beam upon him ! How softly the little hand would creep into his ! And how earnestly would he pooh-pooh the service rendered, while his heart leaped for exultation—the hypocrite !

Charley had a strong capacity for belief. He was an optimist to the backbone. There was not a single flaw in his contentment. He could even afford to feel sorry for Dexter. Since all barriers were now cast down, all bogeys dispersed from his path or slain, why *should* he be selfish? The realization of his fairest hopes could not be far off, and in his excited fancy he stood once again in the old villa at Perth Amboy—in a home made glad by the return of a loved, if erring father. Again he felt the breath of the sea in his face, and saw speeding across the sunlit waters another yacht with its glossy flanks threaded with sea-foam, and its sails, spread like banners in the wind; saw a face of frosted-bronze beside the tiller, and a nearer and dearer one bending down its roses to his.

All this, with a red nose, purple lips, perspiring eye-lids and tingling ears. Then he saw Martha and Katty coming up the road. He almost ran in his eagerness to meet him.

‘Marty, dear!’ he exclaimed, his face quite radiant with happiness and his wind entirely gone, ‘I am *so* glad to see you. Do you feel all right this morning?’

‘Oh yes, thanks!’ she answered, some-

what cavalierly ; ‘ but what for mercy’s sake have you got there in your arms, Charley ?’

His countenance fell. His hopes dropped down to the point of congealment. If his somewhat random and chaotic thoughts could have been formulated, the result would have been summarized in these words :

‘ What manner of woman can this strange creature be ?’

‘ Well,’ he said, ‘ there’s some Guava jelly, and a rolled tongue, I believe they call it ; and some grapes and a pine-apple and a bottle of Chartreuse.’

‘ And what, pray, are you going to do with them all ? Have your philanthropic notions ended in your establishing a charity out here upon the hem of the universe ?’

‘ Well, Marty, they are for you,’ he answered ruefully. ‘ Who else would they be for ?’

‘ Well, for my part, I never saw such a fellow in all my life,’ she retorted. ‘ Everybody in the village imagines by this time, I suppose, that you are a grocer’s man, and won’t leave the goods without the money. Have you been pottering about here a long time ?’

‘ About two hours, I should think.

‘ Well, then, you are a simpleton.’

‘Marty!’

‘I take it back, you are worse. Most people have iron in their blood—you have brass. For pure undefiled cheek, I have never met your equal.’

‘Well, Marty,’ pleaded the now utterly crestfallen Charley, ‘I did not mean to offend you. I can carry the darned things back again; but you will, at least, accept these flowers.’

‘Oh, bother your flowers! give them to some good-looking Limeborough girl, who can appreciate them. Your cousin, Miss Cadmus, now—she might like them very much.’

Was it for this, then, that he had fought with that relentless freezing tide, and had torn her from the grasp of the foul weeds at the river’s bottom? It would seem so; though, had he possessed a greater knowledge of the world, he would have expected nothing else.

He made no reply, and so they reached the cottage-door in silence. Then he spoke:

‘I may come in, I presume,’ he said, in a faltering voice.

‘Oh, I suppose so,’ she answered. ‘It is altogether too ridiculous to see you wander-

ing round, like Buttadæus the Jew, with rolled tongue and guava jelly under your arm. Come in.'

Perplexed, chagrined and thoroughly disheartened, Charley entered the little parlour, deposited his burden upon the table, and, left alone, began to chew the bitter cud of his perplexity. It was some time before this ruminative proceeding was cut short by the entrance of Martha.

'I wish I was a man, Charley,' she said, throwing herself with a sigh into a chair.

'Well, *I* don't, then,' was his frank rejoinder. 'Why do you wish it?'

'So that I might become a hero. I love heroes—men who are brave, and risk their lives for others. I should like to be one of them.'

Charley brightened at once.

'Now she is getting to be herself again,' he thought. 'Will a fellow ever be able to understand these girls.'

Her next words, however, chilled the new fledged hope.

'I can never forgive you, Charley, for going off in the way you did yesterday, and leaving me to the care of a stranger; especially, too, after what passed between us upon the river-bank.'

Charley thinking that she alluded to his going off for the brandy, said with great earnestness :

‘I meant well, Marty. I could not be in both places at once. I would plunge into a hundred ice-holes, if that would make me sure of your love.’

‘Don’t be a hypocrite, and talk that way. I despise boasters. A hundred air-holes! Umph! let that part of the business pass. You did not even come to Mr. Brophy’s house and inquire whether I was dead or alive, Charley Smythe.’

‘Marty! Marty!’ said Charley, in a reproachful tone.

‘Well, did you?’

‘Of course I did, and they wouldn’t let me see you; and I can assure you it hurt me very much.’

‘Well, I never heard of your coming, at all events.’

‘It was that Dexter’s doings, then. How I hate that man!’ and Charley ground his teeth.

Again a subtle process of congealment was at work upon Martha’s features as she answered :

‘Do not speak in that way of Mr. Dexter.

I will not permit it in this house. I can never forget his kindness to me.'

Wider and wider open grew Charley's eyes.

'No particular credit to him,' he said, raising his voice to a strident pitch 'none at all; he chanced to be skating by the air-hole, that was all——'

'Stop—never mind,' she interposed, in a peremptory tone; 'I don't wish to talk any more upon the subject.'

Just then a sharp rat-tat came at the street-door, and Katty shortly announced: 'Doctor Colfax, Miss Martha.'

'You must go now, Charley. I intend having a serious talk with you in a few days,' said Martha, rising.

'All right,' he said, with a sigh; 'and here—I came near forgetting it—is an invitation to a dinner-party at uncle's, day after to-morrow: the carriage will be sent after you; and I think I may be safe in saying that *Dexter* will be there. Good-bye!'

Dr. Colfax gave him a quick sharp look as he passed through the passage. Charley, on his part, was too much preoccupied to notice the doctor.

'Ah, here I am!' said the latter, bursting like a pleasant apparition into the parlour,

‘and glad to see you looking so well this morning. ‘All is well that ends well—trite, but true, Miss Somers! Facilis descendus Averni—which means nothing if you have a hero at hand to draw you promptly out of the abyss.’

By this time he had pulled off his gloves, and was staring at the pictures upon the walls.

‘Ah!’ he pursued, ‘old masters and old friends, and saucy, curly-pated Vigée, too! Jove, how I could have loved that woman!—and she had a brute of a husband too, hadn’t she? A charming face—worth all the beatified ladies that sit in such grand state in the picture-galleries—worth all of them put together. That’s rank heresy, of course; but I don’t care a snap of my finger. Look at their celestial highnesses Raphael’s women! Lovely, sweet!—yes, oh yes, but divine! Not a bit of it. Goody-goody enough for Sunday-school teachers—beautiful enough for grand-duchesses, but utterly inconceivable when the motherhood of God is in question. Heresy again, more heresy!—eh? If I tread on any corns, throw Memling and John Van Eick—with *their* Madonnas, plaited hair, farthingales, and all—in my teeth! Plainly,

I know nothing whatever about art. I belong to the race of sciolists, which means that I have my crotchets, and am proud of them. As for Vigée, though (that is an excellent copy, Miss Somers)—Vigée, with all her vanity, she really captivated me. It was my first indiscretion, my first folly; and I may add, my last. I am an old bachelor, Miss Somers, though I am a bit of a Turk among the matrons and girls of flower-land. I have a seraglio—don't blush!—of three hundred lady-roses, Miss Somers, guarded over by a monster, with bow-legs and a dreadful wen, who is the father of fourteen children, and has been my gardener for a quarter of a century; but I am airing my hobby, which is a sign of imbecility. Did you sleep well, Miss Somers?

‘Oh yes, thank you,’ she said, laughing.

‘You have no sore throat?’

‘No.’

‘No cough, or irritation of the lungs?’

‘No.’

‘Good, very good. You ran a great risk, and have escaped by the skin of your teeth! By-the-bye, the young man I met in the passage appears to have a terrible cold. I had a little business with Mr. Brophy, next door,

before I came here, and we saw him walking up and down the road before your house. Mr. Brophy tells me that his name is Perry ; but I think there must be some mistake about that, as my old chum is a bachelor like myself, though, of course—— Ah, well ! never mind ; he is a friend of yours, I suppose ?’

‘ Yes, an old schoolfellow from America,’ she answered, reddening.

‘ Well, he is a fine young fellow,’ pursued the doctor ; ‘ and it’s a great pity he has got such a cold ; you should advise him to look well after it. Our friend, Mr. Dexter, now, he will surely be in for it. If *he* escapes with anything short of diphtheria, he may consider himself a lucky man. But then, the charming Miss Cadmus will take good enough care of him.’

‘ You are acquainted with Miss Cadmus ?’ said Martha quickly.

‘ Why, my dear young lady, she made my acquaintance before she did her father’s. But, by-the-bye, I remember now where I first saw our young friend. Smythe, that’s his name, *not* Perry ; Brophy *was* mistaken. He is a relative of Cadmus’, and I met him there at luncheon the other day. He came near

eating Dexter for some fling at the American President. He had a lucky escape, for Dexter would have proved a most unsavoury and indigestible morsel, I can assure you ; a high-spirited little fellow, though, that Smythe. You took the draught, of course, Miss Somers, and found it to be efficacious ? Just so, just so. Oh ! while I think of it, if it is not too much of a liberty, may I ask you to favour me with a view of the picture you are painting for my friend Perry ?

Without appearing to notice Martha's confusion, he proceeded to wipe his glasses and adjust them to his nose.

Her hesitation was but momentary. She had become fairly nauseated with the name of Perry, and was resolved to continue the deception no longer.

'I am painting no picture, and I know no Mr. Perry,' she answered ; 'and I might as well say so first as last.'

The doctor surveyed her admiringly a moment through his glasses—then he electrified her.

'Well, and I don't know any Perry either. I hope your conscience is eased—*mine* is. We have both of us told some crackers.'

'I am astonished, Dr. Colfax!' she exclaimed.

‘Not half so much as you may be yet, Miss Summerfield,’ he interposed with a laugh.

‘Summerfield!’ she repeated; ‘you know my name?’

‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘and if I am not greatly mistaken, your father, Charles Summerfield, was a chum of mine at Oxford, and prince of good fellows he was too.’

Martha, by this time, was white to the lips.

‘How did you come to find this out, sir?’ and her voice trembled.

‘Come, I might as well confess the whole truth,’ he said. ‘This very excellent young fellow Charley was guilty of what I will term, under the circumstances, a pardonable indiscretion last evening. He had experienced some great annoyance, and was feeling very badly from some cause or the other, and went to the Dolphin and Magpie in Limeborough, where, you may be sorry to hear, he got woe-fully drunk.’

Martha shrugged her shoulders.

‘Disgusting!’ she said.

‘Well, it did not strike me so, Miss Summerfield; but still, having been once in the same deplorable condition myself, I may

be a trifle too lenient. But never mind, I will tell you how I chanced to meet him. Upon leaving you last evening, I found, by reference to my memorandum book, that I had overlooked a patient at the Dolphin and Magpie;—one of the landlord's daughters. As I suspect her case to be an incurable passion for a good-looking groom in her father's stable, for whom she intends to die, if the embargo is not removed from the fellow's suit, I gave her the usual emetic (she has had six without having the slightest effect upon her obstinacy), and then I dropped a moment into the coffee-room to look at the *Times*; and there I found our friend in conversation with two commercial travellers, and in imminent danger of a fight; for Jefferson Davis and the American war was the bone of contention between them. I played the rôle of oil upon troubled waters, detached our friend from the party, and conducted him to the residence of his uncle, where, I am afraid, if I know anything of Mr. Cadmus, he received some avuncular attentions of a not very pleasing nature—poor fellow! However, on the way, thanks to the potency of the Dolphin and Magpie's whiskey, he unburdened his heart to me, and incidentally let drop a bundle

of family papers (I speak metaphorically, of course) relating to yourself.'

Martha looked so thoroughly frightened, that the doctor immediately added :

'Pray do not fear! Limeborough whiskey may have worked a miracle for you. Your father, if I am not very much mistaken, was a very dear friend of mine; but, poor devil, he got into sad trouble.'

'Oh, sir,' said Martha eagerly, 'can you tell me about that? upon my discovering what that trouble was, my very happiness now depends. Oh! *can* you tell me, sir?'

'Of course I can,' the doctor commenced, when a knock came at the door, and looking through the window he added: 'It is Mr. Dexter. I will reserve what I was about to say for another occasion; I have my reasons.'

Dexter entered with great *empressement*, and advanced with outstretched hand to meet Martha. At sight of the doctor, however, his fervour chilled, and he assumed at once a clerical air. Bowing to the latter, he turned once more to Martha, and said in his blandest tones :

'I called, Miss Somers, to see how you are feeling to-day; I trust the presence of Dr. Colfax implies nothing serious?'

‘No, no,’ interposed the doctor, ‘my patient is doing well—remarkably well. How is it with yourself, sir? Do you experience any ill effects from your—your—ha! ha!—if I were a Baptist now, I could make a little joke—from your immersion, sir, yesterday?’

‘None, thank you,’ rejoined Dexter, with an uneasy smile.

‘The water must have been terribly cold, though!’

‘Miss Somers can tell you about that; she was the principal sufferer.’

‘Ah, you clergymen are altogether *too* modest. After a liberal allowance has been made for my egotism, which pervades me, say, as juice does the grape, I am sure that if I had dragged Miss Summer—Somers from the river, through a tap-hole a few inches wide, no one would have blamed me if I had bruited the exploit to the four quarters of Stubble-shire. But I must go,’ looking at his watch and picking up his hat. ‘I will see you in a few days again, Miss Somers’ (this with a significant look). ‘Good-day! good-day, Mr. Dexter.’

When the door had closed upon him, Martha turned with a burning face to the clergyman, and said :

‘How can I ever repay the debt of gratitude I owe you, Mr. Dexter?’

Here was the crux; the rubicon to be crossed or abandoned as unfordable; the steel link in the golden chain with which he was tempted to bind this young heart to him for ever. Now, Dexter was a *man* first of all. A good man, in so far as he openly professed a belief in the Thirty-Nine Articles and publicly asserted his faith in the dogmas of the Reformation, the heresy of Dissent, the Ecclesiastical *sang azur* of Episcopacy, and the supremacy above all creeds of the Anglican Church—a very good man, indeed. But it chanced that while he was perfectly willing to subscribe to any formula that would ensure his bread and butter, he was at heart a disbeliever and a past-master in the art of modern Tartuffery. We have already said that he had taken orders through necessity, and not through predilection. For a suitable consideration he would have officiated at the shrine of Vishnu, or Mumbo Jumbo even; in other words, and in a purely business sense, he was willing to play the part of a religious weathercock, and point to any designated point of the moral compass, providing the pecuniary result were adequate.

To do him full justice, however, he thoroughly detested his profession, and wished himself well out of it. He was a Voltairian to the backbone. He read Bolingbroke in secret. He possessed an *unexpurgated* edition of Gibbon, and had pondered long and often over those famous chapters of the 'Decline and Fall.' For the political and social heresies of Mr. Thomas Paine, he felt no sort of admiration, but he was free to confess that a perusal of the 'Age of Reason' was little conducive to a waverer's peace of mind. However, the fact remained that he was the recognised guardian of the Deadwick moralities; upon whom devolved the task of dispensing, from the Deadwick pulpit, a weekly dole of platitude, which his parishioners were fain to accept as they did the rain, the sunshine, the early peas and the poisonous ergot upon the rye—unquestioningly; and until something better offered, he had not the slightest idea of relinquishing what, after all, was to him a really lucrative profession.

His present thoughts, briefly formulated, simply amounted to this :

It was a certainty that he could marry Lottie Cadmus, and ultimately receive a very pretty fortune at her hands. But, in truth, he

cared very little for her, and he knew that the almost inevitable condition of a marriage in that quarter would be his continuing in orders for an indefinite period. On the other hand, there was a strong probability, if he made good use of his opportunities, that he could marry Martha Summerfield, obtain a fortune at once, and definitively sever his connection with the Church.

The thought of profiting by Martha's ignorance of the real history of her rescue would never have occurred to an honest man. It came, however, quite naturally to the surface of Dexter's reflections—like a bubble of foul gas in a putrid pool—and immediately assumed the guise of a temptation which he could not resist. No one had witnessed the accident; the circumstantial evidence was strongly in his favour, and his word was sure to outweigh the assertions of a stranger, who, it could be easily shown, had a strong personal motive in having them believed. The balance of advantage was clearly in favour of his marrying Martha, and his hatred of Charley Smythe would lend a fine zest to the undertaking. So he resolved to try.

'You owe me nothing, Miss Summerfield,' he answered, in that low sweet voice of his,

which Martha found so hard to resist. 'The consciousness that I have been of service to you is my best reward ; moreover, the service itself was of a very trivial nature.'

'Do you *really* think so?' asked Martha, raising her eyes to his face, 'for I should not wish you to be guilty of such a paltry affectation as that. Brave deeds should not be pooh-poohed and spoken contemptuously of by their authors, in my opinion.'

'Oh, I meant what I said,' he rejoined, with a faint show of colour. 'I would take the same pains to rescue a dog from a similar predicament, I think.'

'*Just* the same pains?' said Martha, after a moment's pause; 'and *any* dog, whether you cared for him or not?'

'By no means,' he answered, with a smile. 'I have my preferences, of course, and if it had to be that I should perform for somebody this service, I should prefer that this somebody were you above everybody else in the world.'

Again Martha elevated her eyebrows.

'Except Miss Cadmus,' she submitted archly.

'I do not except Miss Cadmus,' was his reply.

‘You are either guilty then of disloyalty to the future Mrs. Dexter, or you think me susceptible to polite blandishments,’ she answered in a graver tone.

‘I am in too serious a mood for flattery, and as for the charge of disloyalty, it would be more pertinent if you were to tell me who the future Mrs. Dexter is to be!’ he said, without removing his eyes from hers.

‘Why, Miss Cadmus, of course,’ she said, with curt decision.

‘You have studied the soothsayer’s art to little purpose, I am afraid,’ he answered. ‘I have no intentions—despite the *on dits* to the contrary—of marrying Miss Cadmus.’

‘No-o?’ she said, affecting an air of incredulity.

‘I have spoken the truth, and disproved your power of forecast. Now may I, in turn, exercise *my* gift of prophecy?’

‘To what end?’

‘Your matrimonial future.’

‘I do not propose to have any such thing.’

‘Are you a free agent, then?’

‘Decidedly, in that respect. Why do you ask?’

‘Let me answer that question by another. If what you say is true, why then does Mr.

Smythe so confidently air his pretensions to your hands ?’

‘Charley Smythe!’ exclaimed Martha, red as a poppy with vexation and annoyance, ‘he is no more to me than—than the lump of coal in the grate yonder! Thank you very much, sir! I perceive now what kind of an oracle *you* would prove to be.’

‘I am profoundly glad to hear you say so,’ said Dexter, in a tone that caused Martha to turn from red to white and from white to red again, all in the space of a second.

‘Ah!’ she said, ‘you do not like him, perhaps, and there we differ, for if nature has *not* endowed him with the courage some other people possess, she at least has filled his heart to overflowing with good intentions.’

This was a little unexpected, and Dexter immediately remarked :

‘You contradict yourself, Miss Summerfield; you went just now to the grate in search of a comparison when it was a question of your liking for Mr. Smythe; moreover, do you remember the old saying about good intentions?’

‘That an undesirable place to mention is paved with them?—yes, oh yes! It sounds well, but the epigram always reminded me of

a tiger-skin stuffed with straw, or a cobra minus his fangs, fascinating us under false pretences. There is another saying, however, not so brilliant by half, to the effect that "*Les malheureux ont toujours tort*," which I am afraid is but too true. If Mr. Smythe had been fortunate enough to possess an heroic nature, it is more than probable that I should *not* have gone to the grate for my comparison. As it was, I went a little out of my way, in order to emphasise my assertion that Mr. Smythe can never be anything more to me than a friend. Still, I say once again, that he is at heart a very excellent young gentleman, whose intentions, could he but execute them, are worthy of quite another place than the one to which the epigrammatist would consign them.'

'Ah, I see! It is just as I expected; you *do* think a great deal of him,' said Dexter, throwing himself back with an impatient gesture in his chair.

'Do *you* mind, Mr. Dexter?' said Martha, looking up with an affectation of surprise.

'Yes, I *do* mind—very much mind; and I might as well say at once what is in my heart.'

He had risen, had bent quite over and

seized her hand, when a knock came at the door, and Katty, once more appearing, announced 'Doctor Colfax.'

'I—I am sorry to disturb you,' he said, glancing quickly from one to the other; 'but I believe I left my gloves behind me. Ah! yes—here they are upon the table. Thank you very much,' as Martha, anticipating him, reached forward and put them in his hands.

'I had not seen them before!' she explained.

'Oh, it was of but little consequence,' he answered; 'I have been to see a patient up at the old manor-house, and I thought I would drop in on my way back and ascertain if I *had* left them here, for I was not quite sure on that point. It is very good in you, Mr. Dexter,' he continued, suddenly facing round to that gentleman, who now stood somewhat awkwardly feeling the brim of his hat—'very good in you, indeed, to cheer up my patient in this way. She has got a better colour already. Were you about to return to Limeborough, sir? If so, you are welcome to a seat in my brougham.'

Mr. Dexter, destitute of an excuse for prolonging his interview with Martha, was constrained to defer the very important com-

munication he had been upon the point of making to her, and accept the doctor's invitation. He had fully resolved, at the moment of the latter's entrance, to make a declaration—we will not say of his love, but of his readiness to confer matrimonial honours upon Martha : a moment's reflection having sufficed to show him that this would be a wise and judicious use of a most favourable opportunity. What counter-considerations might arise in his mind before a suitable occasion should again occur, was an open question with him, for Dexter very much distrusted his own power of remaining steadfast for long to his most deliberate convictions.

One thing, however, was very certain. He had committed himself to a falsehood from which there was no turning back ; and he felt, indeed, that there was a certain amount of heroism in defying the consequences of his act.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH A RIDDLE IS SOLVED.

CHARLEY SMYTHE, dumbfounded by Martha's altered manner towards him, was troubled, during the remainder of the day, by a continually recurring suspicion that a misunderstanding of some nature must be at the bottom of the perplexing business. This suspicion was abundantly confirmed the next morning, when, for the purpose of obtaining from Martha an explanation of her conduct, he visited the cottage at an early hour, and was met by the announcement that Miss Summerfield had gone up to London by the express-train the evening before.

'Gone !' repeated Charley, in blank dismay; 'and did she leave no message for me, Katty ?'

'No, sah, 'cept dat she'd gone on 'portant business ; dat was all, sah.'

Something serious, indeed, must have happened to bring about such a change as this within thirty-six hours. And he began to feel the equanimity with which he had hitherto regarded his ice-adventure fast changing into a feeling of regret that the incident had ever occurred, since it would appear that heart-alienation and sorrow were to be the outcome of it after all. It was, he thought, just as if the icy water had found its way into her heart and had chilled in it every bit of tender feeling she had ever entertained for him.

‘Are you sure, Katty, that is all she said?’ he asked, with great earnestness.

His long face evidently made some impression upon Katty, for she answered :

‘Fore de bressed Lord, sah, dat is every word she said.’

Charley said ‘Humph!’ and reflected a moment with his eyes cast upon the ground, then turned as if to go, paused again, and added :

‘When will she return?’

‘Not until to-morrow, I tink, sah; she’ll be back den, though, shuah, for she’s gwine to a dinner-party in the evenin’.

‘Yes, I know that.’

‘ And den, sah, she don’t gwine to want to be away fro’ home on Sunday.’

‘ Oh! she doesn’t, eh?’ said Charley quickly. ‘ Wouldn’t miss going to church for a good deal, I suppose?’

As Katty did not reply to this, he said ‘ Humph!’ again in a manner approaching to a snort, and added :

‘ Well, it was very imprudent for Miss Summerfield to go off in that way to London, and you may tell her that I said so, if you please. What did the doctor say about her yesterday?’

‘ Dat she was all right, sah.’

‘ No cough or anything of that sort?’

‘ Oh no, sah.’

‘ Appetite good, I suppose?’

‘ Very good, sah.’

‘ Ah! you didn’t happen to hear how she liked the grapes, I presume?’

‘ I don’t tink she tasted dem, sah; ’pears as though Mr. Dexter eat ’em all up.’

‘ What!’ exclaimed Charley, in a towering rage; ‘ and was *he* here yesterday?’

‘ Yes, sah; when you leff de house he come snakin’ hisself in right away.’

He waited to hear no more, turned on his heel, jammed his hat over his eyes, thrust his

hands deep into his pockets, and strode excitedly up the road. Opposite the church he stopped and apostrophised it with clenched fists.

‘I am ashamed of *you*,’ he exclaimed, ‘for encouraging and keeping the wind and the rain off the head of a sneak and hypocrite. Why don’t you get struck by lightning, or fall down yourself and smash him in the midst of the ten commandments some Sunday? That’s your mission—do you hear?’

A violent fit of coughing cut his philippic short, though without altering his mood. Retracing his steps, he soon found himself in front of the Deadwick brewery. He merely glanced up an instant, and was passing on, when he heard in stentorian tones :

‘Good morning to you, sir;’ and once more looking up, he saw Mr. John Brophy standing in the open gateway.

‘Oh ! how de do, Mr. Brophy ; cold, isn’t it ?’ he said, and was resuming his walk, when John called him back.

‘You must be rare an’ cold, sir. Won’t you stop a bit and warm yoursen ? for the young lady, I know, has gone away, and it’s a pretty bit of a tramp to Limeborough upon a nipping morning, that I’m well aware on.’

‘Well, it *is* rather frosty out here, and I feel the icicles growing in my throat. I suppose you *could* give a fellow a nip of something that would thaw them out, eh! Mr. Brophy?’

‘Well, now then, sir, you just come in an’ let me try, and if I don’t succeed, it won’t be my fault nor the sperrit’s neither,’ said John heartily. ‘This way, sir,’ he added, opening the office door; ‘there’s them i’ the business as has gran’ carpets an’ mahogany desks an’ cheers in their offices; but their beer’s no better for ’t, sir, nor their welcome neither, for that matter.’

Whereupon John fell tooth and nail upon a wooden-bottomed chair, which he divested of a set of harness, a bottle of horse liniment, a curry-comb, and—by dint of much rubbing with a corn-sack—a sticky amalgam of dust and coal ashes.

‘There, sir, sit you down comfortable by the fire, while I give it a good rake—it’ll burn up in a minute or two; an’ tell me now, what ull you take? beer’s too cold, you know, an’ say now, will you leave it to me, sir, to mix a glass as ull warm you through an’ through to your very heart?’

‘Oh, yes, by all means; that’s just the spot

in me that needs warming the most,' said Charley, after another attack of that terrible cough which left his breath quite spent and his eyes streaming with tears.

'Dear heart! what a cold you've got!' said John compassionately, as he busied himself in filling a somewhat pot-bellied kettle from a water pitcher in the corner. 'Why! man alive! I've known a gentler cough nor that to carry as tidy a bit o' human flesh into the graveyard as iver you laid your two eyes upon.'

'Is that so?' said Charley, stretching his feet out upon the fender.

John walked to the desk, opened it, and removed a brown paper parcel containing sugar, which he deposited upon the mantel-shelf; then, having produced two not over scrupulously clean glasses from beneath a spare wagon shaft, he said with a sigh:

'You mayn't believe me, sir, but if you don't mind taking a turn i' the graveyard wi' me some day, I can pint her out to you. She turned just fourteen stone, sir, and I may say, confidential like, to you, sir, that but for her cough, she might——,' and here John, with a glass in each hand, looked carefully about him—'*she* might ha' been Mrs. Brophy i'stead o' the missis.'

Having said which, he disappeared like harlequin through a trap-door at Charley's feet, whence he shortly emerged with a disreputable-looking jug of the stoneware species in his hand.

'And now, sir,' he continued, pouring a liberal portion of the jug's contents into each of the glasses, 'if you like a drop o' something old an' meller, y'are going t'have a treat, my word for 't.'

'It looks and smells as though it was the right sort, that's a fact,' said Charley, with a sniff of approval.

'Twenty years old, that sperrit is, an' as meller as sweet oil, sir--there now,' extending a steaming tumbler, 'try that, and see how soon it ull take the cold creeps out o' you.'

Charley sipped at his glass.

'Jove!' he said, 'that *is* good; and here, I say, you must have a smoke with me,' he added, taking a cigar-case from his pocket, 'these are real Partagas--no cabbage-leaf about them, old man--try one.'

John took one in his hand, examined it a moment, smelt it, and handed it back again.

'No thank you, sir. There's nothing to

my notion like a bit o' shag tobacker in a well-seasoned clay-pipe—that's *my* notion on't; an' if you don't mind, I'll take a few whiffs wi' you over the grog, just to be sociable like.'

Charley having no objection, of course, to this, John took a blackened stump of a pipe from his desk, and leisurely proceeded to fill it with very ill-smelling weed.

'I like to get the taste on't,' he explained, when, after giving Smythe a light, he began in the form of vast clouds of unsavoury smoke to contribute to the general obscurity of the mangy little office. 'You must draw a deal upo' your imagination, I take it, when you put such a mild flavoured thing as that i' the mouth.'

'Well, I don't know about that,' said Charley, reflectively. 'The first one I ever smoked was strong enough for *me*. You see, I was afraid to own up to the governor, so when the doctor came I had an emetic, which I didn't need a bit, and a couple of leeches on my chest, and a dose of salts and senna. Jove! if I had tried your pipe, old man, I shouldn't have escaped with anything short of blue pills, a fly blister, and a coffin. I'll borrow it sometime when I have got a grudge

against a fellow and want to kill him. I'll get him to smoke it. It would be almost as good as prussic acid.'

'Why, who could *you* have a grudge again', sir? You are one o' the good-natured sort, you are, I take it,' remarked John, slyly observing Smythe through the bottom of his tilted glass.

'Well, I am; you are right,' said Charley, 'but a fellow can't stand everything, you know, old man. The worm *will* turn sometimes, eh? I shouldn't like to commit murder, or anything of that sort, but there *is* somebody I should like to hurt a little—not *very* much, you know—not enough to make his doctor's bill *too* large—a week or two in bed with a bad jaw would be quite sufficient, for I am not *very* revengeful, you see.'

'Gad, sir, I admire your frankness. Is it anybody I know, I wonder?'

'Oh, yes!'

'It couldn't be anybody in the way of a parson now, I suppose?' said John, with a knowing wink.

Charley gave a sudden start, crossed his legs, threw himself back in the chair, and surveyed the brewer an instant without replying. Then :

‘Do you mean Mr. Dexter?’ he demanded.

John gave another wink, deposited his empty glass upon the mantelshelf, puffed vigorously at his pipe a moment, then faced round to Charley, and dropped his voice to a confidential pitch.

‘I’m afraid the parson’s got the best on you, sir,’ he said, with several confirmatory jerks of his head.

‘What the devil do you mean?’ said Charley, his face a-flame in an instant.

‘Well, between you an’ me,’ said John, ‘I may say as the parson’s got a heap o’ knowledge piled away up here,’ tapping his forehead, ‘for he preaches fine, an’ don’t stint us in ’th hard words at all. The missis says his language is beautiful, and it must be, for *I* can’t make out much of it, as is to be expected. An’ as I say, the parson’s altogether a little bit above me, intellectoorily speaking. Now, I don’t profess to be a seraphin, or anything of that sort, o’ course; I know just where my pints are the weakest, an’ I may say as it’s mostly when a good-looking young woman is anywheres around—this o’ course is betwixt man and man—for the missis—— Well, there’s a many things as the missis is peculiar about,

an' that's one o' them things. But, Lord, sir, such a head as she's got! Such a knowledge! Hebrew's just meat and drink to her; an' when th' parson says to her, "Mrs. Brophy, parlay voo?"—something in a strange tongue—*she* says, "Wee, wee," an' the two on 'em go a galloping away in a manner as is wonderful to listen to. But, as I say, Mr. Dexter, after all, is only a man like the rest on us.'

'No, he isn't,' interposed Charley, quickly.

John surveyed him in some astonishment an instant, then rose and replenished his pipe. When he had lighted the latter, he said:

'An' what is he then, sir?'

'A fraud.'

'A *what*!' exclaimed John. 'Do you mean that he's not *honest*?'

'No, not that exactly,' said Charley, warmly. 'I'll do him justice—he wouldn't steal *both* coppers off a dead man's eyes: he'd leave one behind for the sake of appearances. And if he did pick your pocket and appropriate your purse, he'd leave your handkerchief, if it chanced to have your name upon it, that is all. And he would preach you a beautiful sermon upon integrity afterwards, that is more!'

John stared at the speaker in undisguised amazement.

‘Well, sir, I’m afraid y’are going a bit *too* fur ; jealousy is jealousy, as I often tell the missis, an’ I don’t say as I didn’t once knock a man down by mistake, from his having red whiskers (an’ he the clerk o’ the parish, too, though unbeknown to me), because I was jealous of a young woman as disgraced herself the same week wi’ marrying a coachman. But, as I say, there’s outsides and limits to most things, an’ you must admit that the parson’s one ahead o’ you, anyhow.’

‘And why is he?’

‘Oh, you should ha’ been upo’ th’ ice th’ other night—that was a rare chance, sir, that you missed,’ said John, wagging his head with an air of intense regret.

‘What night?’ demanded Charley, the pupils of his eyes now visibly dilating with astonishment.

‘Why, the night, sir, she fell through th’ ice. An’ it were a pity, too, upo’ my word it was.’

‘What are you talking about? who says I wasn’t there?’ said Charley, flinging his cigar into the grate and starting to his feet.

‘ Well, you might ha’ been upo’ th’ ice, but you see you were not anigh the hole when the poor gell tumbled in. That’s the misfortune on it, sir,’ said John, compassionately.

‘ I wasn’t ?’

‘ O’ course not.’

‘ Oh ! thank you ! Does anybody know who *was* there ?’

‘ Why, Mr. Dexter, who pulled her out like a brave man ; an’ as I say, why *shouldn’t* she like him for that ? Come now, man, you must be reasonable, an’ confess that the parson has one on you there,’ said John, with great seriousness.

‘ Dexter pulled her out ?’

‘ Certainly ; an’ didn’t you know *that*, sir ?’

‘ Oh ! that’s good—I like that—go on, and tell me about it. Did he dive down through the hole, then, and drag her up from the bottom ? Go on ! let us hear ! I never listened to such an interesting story in my life !’ said Charley, fairly white with mingled indignation and astonishment.

John began, in truth, to be a little surprised himself at his visitor’s demeanour, but attributing it to the unwelcome nature of the intelligence he had just imparted, he answered :

‘I was upo’ the river bank, sir, an’ walking toward t’house, when I heared a voice, an’ lookin’ down among the bushes, I saw the parson wi’ a young gell, all in a drip, in his arms. Wi’ that I scrambled down, an’ he told me how he’d pulled her out o’ t’hole, an’ asked if she might bide for the night in t’house, as the brewery was too fur to walk wi’ the young gell in such a state. An’ when she come to and saw the parson, it did my heart good, sir, to see how thankful she were to him for saving of her life, though, ’pon my soul, thinking o’ you, sir, an’ suspecting what brought you up here to the village, I couldna help feeling sorry that you didna stand in the parson’s shoes ; but it may chance to be now that you canna swim.’

‘Swim ! the devil !’ exclaimed Charley. ‘You’d better not smoke any more of that tobacco, old man ; it’s getting into your head. Do you really mean to tell me that she thinks *Dexter* saved her ?’

‘Certainly !’ said John, removing his pipe from his mouth and gazing with parted lips at his interlocutor.

‘And did *he* tell you that ?’

‘O’ course he did.’

‘Then he’s a d—d liar !’ cried Charley,

white to the lips with passion. 'He had no more to do with it than that shovel and tongs! It was *I* who dragged her up from the bottom of the river and saved her life! Do you hear, Mr. Brophy? *Do you hear what I say?*'

John was too amazed to immediately answer.

'My God!' exclaimed Charley, after a moment's pause, 'now I understand; now I see why she has been so cool to me. She takes me for a coward, and makes a hero of Dexter!' then, after pacing the floor a few times, he stopped by John's chair and laid his hand upon the brewer's shoulder.

'Look here, old man,' he said, in a tremulous voice, 'you have been fooled! *I* did it, and I want you to believe me, Brophy. It wasn't very much to do, of course; but, little as it was, Dexter has no more right to claim the honour of it than he has to rob your money drawer. *I* saw her fall through the hole. I'd been with her up to London all day, and had walked out with her to Deadwick. I wouldn't have left her at all, but you know what young girls are: she thought my coming to the cottage so often might make a talk in the village. So I turned to go back,

when, before I had taken a hundred steps, I heard a scream, and saw her drop through the ice. My God, how I ran ! but it was too late—she had gone to the bottom sure enough ! Then I took off my boots and plunged into the water—that is where I caught this cold ; and—well, did *you* ever attempt to find anybody at the bottom of a frozen river ? No, and you wouldn't care about doing it for a living either, my friend. I was down there, I should think, about six weeks, hunting around among the weeds and in the mud, until I thought my chest would surely crack open. At last I got hold of her ; which was nothing unless I found my way back to the air-hole. You see, to fall overboard in the summer-time is a trifling matter. You sink, and you swim up again to the top, and there you are all right ; but under the ice, that is a serious business. It's like trying to find the scuttle through the smoke of a house on fire, or being screwed down alive in an iron coffin. However, I succeeded ; and when I got out again, I'm d—d if there didn't stand Dexter, with his hypocritical long-faced mug, watching to see what kind of a fish I had been diving for. Well, he helped to lift her out : I'll say that much for him ; and then he said,

"Go, and get some brandy!" and off I went, like a fool, to some farmhouse he pointed out to me, and brought back a tumblerful; but the Reverend Mr. Lothario had disappeared, and what I had been fishing for had disappeared with him, and, in short, I had the river, the brandy, and a suit of wet clothes all to myself. Then I think I swore—I *know* I swore—and went straight up to your house. There, indeed, she was; but I was turned away from the door like a dog.'

John put down his glass, groaned, and shook his head.

'Oh, I see!' said Charley; 'you don't believe me?'

John rose, with a face a-flame with honest indignation, and grasped his hand.

'Say not another word,' said he. 'Indeed I do believe you; an' eh, upo' my soul, he mun be a bad un' then, that parson—an' wi' you so fond o' the young gell too, an' her to give a' the credit to a blackguard!—dom it! there! I've said it; and dom it, I'll not take it back again either; an' what's more, I'm dommed if I'll ever go a-nigh the church again,' and John dashed his pipe to the floor, kicked over a chair, slammed his fist upon the desk—scattering several quill-pens, a file of

invoices, and the contents of the brown paper parcel. The sight of the sugar flying, like a shower of *confetti*, about the office, recalled him to his senses.

‘Come, man, let’s have another drink—your tongue never smelt better—an’ then we’ll talk over this dirty business an’ see what’s to be done,’ said he, bearing down with a somewhat abstracted manner upon the spirit-jug again.

His final injunction, half an hour later, was as follows :

‘Take a fool’s advice now,’ said he, ‘an’ say niver a word until you hear the lie come from the parson’s own lips ; then I hope you’ll throttle him upo’ the spot, an’ may the Lord be wi’ you then, sir, an’ make you strong!’

CHAPTER VIII.

HAYDON VILLA.

ABOUT this very time, Mr. Palmer had a visitor at his office in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He was in the act of opening the last of the morning's letters, when his chief-clerk—the one with the putty complexion and the bladders beneath his eyes—opened the door softly and said :

‘Miss Summerfield is here, sir, and wishes to see you.’

‘Very well, Mr. Soper. *Show* her in. Don't keep the lady waiting.’

Mr. Soper, after a mildly expostulatory wave of the hand—which implied ‘What interest have *I* in keeping her waiting, sir?’—withdrew, closing the door behind him as carefully as if it had been the entrance to Ali Baba's cave. The next moment, Martha entered with very red cheeks, and the sparkle

of a keen frosty wind—for once free from any admixture of fog—in her eyes, and presenting altogether such a pleasant antithesis to her dingy surroundings, that Mr. Palmer, an old bachelor, detected himself in the very act of blushing as he advanced to meet her.

‘Ah! my dear Miss Summerfield, I am heartily glad to see you; pray sit down by the fire,’ he said, wheeling his own easy-chair up to the fender. ‘You are looking remarkably well this morning, and I may say hopeful too. I trust I am right, Miss Summerfield?’

‘Thank you, Mr. Palmer,’ she answered, ‘I am very hopeful.’

‘I am glad to hear it, very glad.’

By this time he had taken a seat by her side, and had assumed the attitude and expression of an attentive listener.

‘Of course you did not expect to see me so soon again,’ she remarked, as a brief exordium to the communication she was about to make.

‘Well, really,’ he answered, dropping for once his professional tone, and adopting one which caused Martha to look up in some surprise; ‘in confessing that I did *not* expect you, Miss Summerfield, I must also confess that the pleasure of seeing you is all the

greater for that reason. Of course, you are in receipt of good news—that much I can read in your eyes at a glance—so that I may safely assume, I think, that since our last interview you have come into possession of some important intelligence bearing upon—er—er——’

‘My father’s disappearance.’

‘Just so; stripped of all superfluous language, the matter resolves itself into simply a question of your father’s disappearance—I *may* say his mysterious disappearance—for I presume you have not yet penetrated to the very bottom of the well, in which this particular Truth is to be found.’

As Martha merely shrugged her shoulders, by way of answer, he added :

‘Just as I expected; *that* well is too deep at present for our Diogenes’ lanterns to fathom. Indeed, I am not sure but that it may be advisable shortly, to bring a policeman’s dark lantern to bear upon the subject. It would be more satisfactory, I think. Diogenes was a very picturesque and eccentric character, no doubt—(by the way, I have a worthy, but unlettered friend, who, from over acquaintance with Mr. Landseer’s very excellent picture, always maintains, and

stoutly too, that Diogenes was a Skye terrier) —but I am afraid that the rush-light of the old philosopher would be of little avail in unearthing Nineteenth Century villainy. Don't start! I speak in general terms, and indeed I am what you very clever Yankees would call "meandering." I will try to be more professional in my language, Miss Summerfield. You have, of course, some news of importance to communicate to me?"

'I have,' she answered; 'and I should prefer—for reasons which will become obvious to you in a minute or two—that this interview should be as brief as possible. Since I saw you on Wednesday, I have learned something respecting the Frenchman of whom I spoke on that occasion. I have had a somewhat startling adventure. I have had an interview with Mrs. Brophy upon the subject of my father's disappearance, and finally, I have obtained, to the best of my knowledge and belief, Mrs. Warren's address.'

Instead of expressing any sense of surprise, Mr. Palmer, who had not, hitherto seemed wholly at ease, relapsed at once into his accustomed manner of one who would say, 'Certainly! of course!' in the face of the most astounding revelations, and as carefully

avoid anything approaching to astonishment, as though the latter were one of the seven deadly sins.

‘Ah!’ he said, drawing his chair up to the desk, and taking a pen in his hand: ‘just so! We will begin, if you please, with the Frenchman,’—whereupon, he made a memorandum upon a sheet of paper, and then faced around with the air of one about to take down important, though by no means unexpected evidence.

She at once related the substance of Charley Smythe’s interview with M. Mivart, and though an acute observer might have detected a passing gleam of satisfaction in Mr. Palmer’s eyes as he listened, he did not once interrupt the course of her narrative.

When she had concluded, he remained thoughtful a moment, then he turned and made several notes upon the sheet of paper.

‘Good, *very* good, so far,’ he said, looking up again; ‘and now for the startling adventure, *if* you please.’

The studied immobility of his features broke down completely before she was half way through her second narrative.

‘Dear me! you give me the cold shivers, quite, Miss Summerfield,’ he exclaimed. ‘It

conveys to me the sense of being sent to serve a term of penal servitude in a refrigerator.'

Again he interrupted her when she came to the episode in the bed-chamber.

'One moment, please. Could you tell me how many bonds there were in the box, and their denomination? But of course you could not; and I suppose you did not chance to observe the *date* of the deposit in the Bank of England either? No! Ah! well, it would be expecting a great deal, under the circumstances. Pray go on, Miss Summerfield.'

When she had concluded, a meditative mood of several minutes' duration came over Mr. Palmer; then he had recourse to his notes once more.

'And now for your interview with Mrs. Brophy,' he said at last.

Upon this, Martha dwelt at considerable length, with the effect of visibly arousing the lawyer's curiosity. Again he reflected for a number of minutes, then he made copious additions to his notes.

'Ah!' he said, looking up with a smile of satisfaction. 'I congratulate you, Miss Summerfield; you have had a busy forty-eight hours—and a *profitable* forty-eight hours. And now there remains simply the address

of Mrs. Warren, which you omitted to mention.'

'The address is of little consequence if she is at Nice,' said Martha. 'Do you think she is at Nice, Mr. Palmer?'

'Certainly *not*!' was his emphatic rejoinder.

Martha puckered her mouth into a very round O.

'Where do you think she is, then?—in London? The address I saw was Haydon Villa, Camden Road, and Mrs. Brophy corroborated it to the extent of saying that Mrs. Warren lived somewhere in Camden Town.'

'Then rest assured that she does *not*,' said Mr. Palmer, in a tone of strong conviction.

'But the address!' said Martha.

'Is undoubtedly an old one. We can ascertain in an instant, however,' he added, leaning over and taking a London Directory from the desk. 'Let us see—Camden Road;' turning over the leaves—'Camden Road—here we are—and Haydon Villa; please look over with me, Miss Summerfield, your eyes are younger than mine. Haydon Villa—it's a long street, and—ah! here it is—and what

did I tell you?—H. Ripley, M.A., F.R.G.S. That doesn't spell Warren, does it ?

Martha saw the letters projecting beyond the lawyer's finger-nail, and read them in dismay.

'Yes,' she faltered, 'I see; perhaps, though, there are *two* Haydon Villas in Camden Road.'

'Ah! that is possible; if you will run your eye down the left hand column, I will do the same with the right.'

After a silence of several minutes' duration, there came a simultaneous 'No' from both their lips.

'Well! and what is to be done *now*?' said Martha, with a crestfallen look. 'I can, at least, go to Haydon Villa and make inquiries, I suppose?'

'By all means, Miss Summerfield. You have good grounds for believing, I think, that Mrs. Warren has at some time occupied the premises in question. That fact, however, we can very easily ascertain by a reference to older directories,' he added, rising and touching a bell. 'Mr. Soper,' said he, turning toward the pasty and underdone-looking face that suddenly appeared in the doorway—'Mr. Soper, be good enough to bring me last

year's directory, and stay—the preceding year's as well.'

Mr. Soper, it would appear, kept these articles always about his person, for the door, when pushed open, revealed him with the two bulky red volumes beneath his arm.

'Yes, sir,' he said, advancing and depositing his burden upon the desk. He was moving away again, when Mr. Palmer called him back and said :

'Miss Summerfield, permit me to introduce to you Mr. Soper, my confidential clerk, whom I propose to send with you to Haydon Villa.'

Martha looked up in mingled surprise and amusement as Mr. Soper solemnly removed his pen from behind his ear, thrust his hand beneath the lapel of his tightly-buttoned coat, and bowing profoundly, said :

'I hope I see you well, mum;' then, springing into an erect attitude, he turned, without awaiting an answer from Martha, toward Mr. Palmer, and added : 'Haydon Villa, sir? and am I to find it here?' tapping one of the directories.

'If you please, Mr. Soper—Camden Road.'

Mr. Soper turned over the leaves with

great precision, found the place, and propelled a very fat and inky forefinger up the column, at length he paused.

‘Haydon Villa—yes, sir—H. Ripley, M.A., F.R.G.S.—here it is.’

‘Write it down, Mr. Soper.’

Mr. Soper did so.

‘Now refer to the other directory, Mr. Soper.’

The other directory was produced. Again the forefinger travelled up the long column. Midway it paused.

‘Haydon Villa! Yes, sir, here it is.’

‘The same occupant, Mr. Soper?’

‘No, sir. It is Warren—Charles Warren, this time.’

‘Gracious goodness!’ and Martha snatched at the book.

Mr. Soper looked at her in deep disgust a moment, and then discovered that the fire was in urgent need of attention.

She couldn’t find the place, of course.

‘Oh dear! where is it?’ and she turned imploringly to Mr. Palmer, who at once pointed out the name. ‘Dear! dear! What is to be done now?’ and she began to look genuinely distressed. ‘Of course, Mr. Palmer, it is my—my——’

The lawyer, following her glance of inquiry, saw it rest upon Mr. Soper's back.

'Oh! speak out! Don't be afraid! As I told you, he is my confidential clerk. A secret with him is as if it were buried in the bowels of the earth.'

Something in the similitude made Martha smile. Turning at this moment and catching her in the act, Mr. Soper began to scowl dreadfully.

'Don't pay the slightest attention to me, I beg of you,' said he. 'Office furniture *might* say a great deal sometimes, but it never does.'

Martha stared hard at him.

'Well,' she answered, 'I was merely going to observe, that this Charles Warren must be my—my—father; that is all.'

'*Must* be?' repeated Mr. Palmer; 'and why?'

'Oh! I don't know; there is the address, and the similarity in the names, and—and—well, I have a presentiment that he is the man. What do *you* think, sir?'

Mr. Palmer smiled.

'We lawyers have our surmises and our intuitions, perhaps, but we are denied the feminine privilege of indulging in presenti-

ments. However, we must carefully look into this thing. Mr. Soper!

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Just refer to the Court Directory of the present year, and see if you can find the name of Charles Warren there.’

Mr. Soper immediately prodded the volume with his fat forefinger, and soon became absorbed, it would appear, in some abstruse arithmetical computation.

‘Good heavens!’ he said, looking up at last, ‘there are nineteen plain Charleses, and about as many more with middle names.’

‘Well, make a list of them all, Mr. Soper, with their respective addresses,’ said Mr. Palmer, ‘and I’ll tell you why I suggest this,’ he continued, turning to Martha. ‘Mr. Soper will call at Haydon Villa and inquire whether Charles Warren is known to its present occupants. If so, our object is gained at once. If not, as I suspect will prove to be the case, Mr. Soper—you hear, Mr. Soper?’

‘I am all attention, sir.’

‘Mr. Soper, I say, will make diligent inquiry in the neighbourhood, among tradespeople for instance, Mr. Soper.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And it is more than probable that he will obtain some information which will give you a clue to the present address of the lady you so much desire to find. But it is not likely that you will learn anything of a very definite nature. It may have transpired—through a servant, for instance—that Mrs. Warren has moved to Brompton or Bayswater, or some other district in London; in which case, Mr. Soper will refer to the list he is now preparing, and if he finds in it a Mr. Charles Warren who resides in Brompton, Bayswater, or anywhere else within the radius, he will prosecute his inquiries in that quarter, as a matter of course, Mr. Soper.’

‘Certainly, sir,’ said that gentleman, thrusting his pen behind his ear, and blotting the completed list with a pad. ‘Certainly, sir, and the sooner the better, I should say.’

As both Martha and Mr. Palmer assented to this, Mr. Soper stepped into the outer-office, whence, having endued himself in a pair of enormous buckskin gloves and a wonderful cape with flowing sleeves, he returned hat in hand (and such a hat! thought Martha), and announced that he was ready.

‘While you are up in that neighbourhood,’ said Mr. Palmer, as a parting injunction to his

subordinate, 'you had better examine a local directory—Hampstead and Highgate are not far from there, you know—and see if you can obtain any additions to your list.'

Martha thought she detected the article-clerk in the act of exchanging a wink with Mr. Soper as she passed through the outer-office, but when she brought her brown eyes into a full focus upon that somewhat cadaverous young gentleman, his whole being was apparently absorbed in the transcribing of a harrowing mortuary record, and she felt that she must have done him an injustice. She did not exchange a word with her companion until they reached the street; then he delivered the following laconicism:

'Cab?'

'Certainly,' she answered.

'Hansom or four-wheeler, mum?'

'Please, don't call me "mum," Mr. Soper. My name is Miss Summerfield.'

Mr. Soper immediately went to the length of removing his hat and apologizing.

'Mum being quite the professional thing, he explained, re-adjusting his head-covering, which Martha mentally compared to a cupola in mourning.

'I think I prefer a hansom,' she said; then,

with a side-long glance at the voluminous cape, she added, 'no I don't, either—one has more room in a four-wheeler.'

Whereupon Mr. Soper whistled to a passing vehicle, which being a ram-shackle affair with a horse but two removes from the knacker's-yard, Martha instantly dismissed.

'I don't care if you did engage him,' she said, curtly. 'I don't intend to have that poor horse on *my* conscience—here comes something better.'

Into which they presently entered. Neither spoke a word until they turned into Museum Street.

'A very extraordinary animal the gorilla,' said Mr. Soper, as if suddenly awakening from a sleep.

'Very,' said Martha, looking him over from head to foot.

'And strong,' he added.

'Yes,' she assented, putting her head nearer the open window.

Then they lapsed into silence again.

Thus far he had preserved the most preternatural solemnity of manner.

'Does he never smile, I wonder?' she thought, as she stole a glance at the placid angularities of his remarkable face. Then

she experienced an almost irresistible longing to puncture the bladders under his eyes with a pin.

‘Mr. Soper!’ said she at last, as they were turning out of Gower Street.

‘Ma’am!’ he exclaimed, in such a startled way that Martha’s conviction as to his previous somnolency was immediately confirmed.

‘Do you?’ she asked, ‘often have the blues?’

‘I was born with them,’ he answered.

Martha again surveyed the wealth of faded crape upon his hat, and said at a venture :

‘Father afflicted in the same way?’

‘Yes, he died of it.’

‘What a horrible death!’ said Martha, looking askance at her companion, and recalling to mind several hair-raising stories of people shut up alone in railway carriages with madmen.

‘There is a worse,’ said Mr. Soper, in a sepulchral voice.

‘And what is that?’

‘The torture of the Larger Catechism.’

‘Oh, well. I’ll only ask one question more. Would it really injure you *very* much were you to smile, Mr. Soper?’

Whereupon she perceived a transforma-

tion scene in Mr. Soper's face that literally astounded her. The flaccid cheeks rolled up into plaits and creases; the most extraordinary lines and wrinkles commenced to creep, as it were, out of his very eyes; and his mouth gradually opening, sent two deep furrows up to his nostrils, and displayed a collection of teeth which was ill assorted enough to remind one of Falstaff's recruits under review. The man *was* positively laughing at last; and Martha, beginning to be afraid of him, watched, in a species of awe, the gradual subsidence of the unwonted emotion from his face.

'How much further is it, Mr. Soper?' she asked at last, in a tone of very palpable anxiety.

By this time he was solemn as a corpse again. Lifting his sleepy eyelids to the level of hers, he answered :

'We shall be there in five minutes, if God and the cabby so will it.'

And, indeed, in five minutes—during which interval no further word was spoken between them—he thrust his head from the window, and the cab came up with a scurr of wheels to the kerbstone. Mr. Soper leisurely descended to the pavement, and motioned to Martha to follow his example.

‘Cannot I remain in the cab?’ she asked.
‘Is it very near?’

‘Very near,’ he answered; ‘and as it is probable that we shall have to make a number of inquiries in the neighbourhood, it will be as well, I think, to do it as quietly as possible. If there is one person in the world who objects to going about the streets as it were with a brass band, it is a detective. *I* am a detective.’

‘You are!’ exclaimed Martha.

‘Upon this occasion, yes,’ he answered.

‘He is worse than Janus,’ she said to herself; ‘he is multifaced; he is Proteus; he is the Chinese alphabet.’

By this time she had descended, and Mr. Soper was engaged in a violent altercation with the cabby over the fare. When the latter had driven away, his heart rankling with a sense of personal injury, Mr. Soper, in his finest graveyard manner, requested Martha to walk slowly up the road as far as the Brecknock Arms, promising to rejoin her there in a very few minutes, which he did; Martha having in the meantime seen him enter a fine stucco villa upon the opposite side of the way.

‘Well, Mr. Soper!’ she exclaimed; ‘and what did you find out?’

‘What I expected,’ he answered; ‘they have never heard of Mrs. Warren. The house had been empty for three months when they took it; but they have a personal grievance against her, it would appear, in the shape of a leaky roof and a cracked boiler in the range, which I did not propose to redress. Let us try some of the tradespeople about here.’

Martha walked in silence beside him down a by-street, filled with shops. At one of these he stopped and said :

‘Let us pump Waggs.’

Waggs, whose name was inscribed in glaring gilt letters over his door, was a butcher; and Martha, as she entered the shop, was struck with dismay at a ghastly array of dead muttuns suspended about the walls in a manner suggestive of Bluebeard’s wives in M. Offenbach’s lively opera. Mr. Waggs, whose person conveyed an impression of succulency such as would have commended him to the approving notice of his *confrères* of the South Sea Islands, stood in a truculent attitude beside his chopping-block, with a long knife in his hand. Martha glanced first at him and

then at the sawdust upon the floor, and began to think of headsman Sanson and *his* basket of sawdust clotted with the fairest blood of France, when Mr. Soper's voice claimed her attention once more.

‘Mr. Waggs, I believe,’ said he, in quite a new tone of voice.

‘Yes, sir,’ said the butcher, wiping his hands upon his apron.

‘Ah! I thought by the looks of your shop that I could not be mistaken. My friend, Mr. Ripley, of Haydon Villa, just round the corner here, assures me that you supply all the best people in the neighbourhood with their meat.’

‘Well, I do mostly, I believe, sir; and I don’t think they finds much fault with what I serves ’em either, sir,’ said the butcher, with a complaisant smile.

‘Ah!’ rejoined Mr. Soper, ‘*I* had a taste of your sirloin the other day. “Ripley,” I said, “where *do* you get such meat as this?” “From Waggs,” he says; “and there’s no meat in London to equal it;” and that is what *I* say, Mr. Waggs, and I wish I didn’t live in Hammersmith; of course you *couldn’t* serve me at that distance.’

‘Well, sir, it would be a pleasure to oblige

you, but you see it *is* a bit fur from here, ain't it?' said Mr. Waggs, apologetically.

'Oh, it is, I know, I know; but let me see, there was something I meant to ask you. Ah, yes—Mrs. Warren—you served her I believe, when she lived at Haydon Villa?'

'Like as not, sir. I won't dispute it if I did.'

'Well, I've forgotten her address, you see,' and Mr. Soper whipped out note-book and pencil. 'I can't, for the life of me, remember whether it's Brompton or Bayswater. Ripley, *he* couldn't recollect it either.'

'Lor'!' said Mr. Waggs.

'And so, if you don't mind, I'll just take it down;' and Mr. Soper wet the end of the pencil with his tongue, and stood in an attitude of attention.

Then light dawned on Mr. Waggs's mind.

'Oh, of course; let me see!' and he began to stroke his chin reflectively. 'Warren! Warren!—yes, I know—I know. She were a very particular sort—liked the best cuts, and *would* have 'em. Yes—yes, I know; and I *have* heard, too, where she went to—— But, you see, I didn't pay no attention to it. You hain't been to Waddy's, I suppose?'

'Waddy's!'

‘Yes, sir ; he’s the baker, jist three doors down to your right ; an’ it wouldn’t surprise me one bit if he could tell you all about it.’

So, a customer coming in at this point, Mr. Soper thanked the butcher with much fervour, and led the way to the street, where he went right down to zero again.

Martha began to be disgusted.

Waddy was quickly found. Upon entering, they saw the very small face of a very small child, peering at them over a rampart of Bath-buns and Madeira-cakes upon the counter, and who, smiling at first, was straight-way frightened by the bigness of Mr. Soper’s voice, as he demanded to see Mr. Waddy.

Mr. Waddy had been taking some refreshment in the little parlour behind the shop, circumstantial evidence of which lingered upon his beard in the shape of crumbs as he stepped behind the counter.

‘Well, sir ?’ he demanded, with the air of a man with a large ‘connection,’ who yielded to the exigences of business merely in waiting upon a casual customer.

‘I am told,’ said Mr. Soper abruptly, ‘that you know the present address of Mr. Charles Warren, formerly of Camden Road. Will you kindly oblige me with it ?’

Mr. Waddy, who was a very tall man, stretched himself up to his fullest height, and took, as it were, a bird's-eye view of Mr. Soper's person. Then a sapient expression crept over his face.

'Look here, sir!' he said, 'whether it's summonses or the county-courts, or the rates, I'm sure *I* don't know nothing about it. An' if you mean my lodgers, there ain't none of that name *here*. Believe it, or don't believe it. Just as you like.'

'Hang your lodgers!' said Mr. Soper impatiently. 'Was Mrs. Warren a customer of yours or wasn't she?'

'Well, I have *some* customers, and I won't deny it; but I've got none but them as pays prompt and regular,' said Waddy doggedly.

'My good friend, we have no designs upon your customers,' interposed Martha pleasantly. 'If you can give me Mrs. Warren's address, I shall thank you very much; the information is not for this gentleman's benefit, but for mine.'

The baker got a good look at Martha for the first time, and he melted like butter.

'Lord! miss, why didn't *you* speak afore?' and he straightway took a ledger from beneath the counter and referred to the index.

‘Warren—W—Oh, there! I know who you mean, and she *was* a lady too; and, let me see—where *did* they say as she’d moved to?—blessed if I can remember just now!—but it appears to me as if it was Bayswater. At all events, Spreads the greengrocer, over the way; he can tell you all about it; his boy and the parlour-maid up to Warren’s kept company, I know, about that time; *he’ll* tell you, I’ll be bound.’

So Martha thanked him, and crossed the street to Spread’s.

‘You had better do the talking, I think,’ said Mr. Soper; ‘my personal appearance does not seem to inspire confidence in this quarter.’

To which suggestion, Martha cordially assented.

‘Mrs. Warren, miss?’ said Spreads—a round-faced, much be-pimpled little man—‘Lor’, yes—rather; and she was a proper sort too, she was; there warn’t no weights and scales in that house—that’s what I liked about her; for when a man tries to get his livin’ honest, he don’t want no weights and scales throwed in his face, does he, miss? And my boy, Tom, was goin’ to marry a young woman there.’

‘So I understand,’ said Martha.

‘Did you now! And it was quite a blight on Tom’s ’art when they moved away, and it was broke off.’

‘But where did they go, Mr. Spreads? I have not been in London for some time, and I wish to find Mrs. Warren very much.’

‘*Do* you, miss! Lor’ bless us! where was it?—I’ve got such a shocking bad memory. You see, Tom is away—up at Squire Eldon’s in Essex, helping with company, or he could tell you all about it. Sarah!’—this to a woman in the rear of the shop—‘where was it them Warrens moved to?’

‘Wasn’t it Brompton?’ suggested the woman.

‘Was it? Blessed if *I* know.’

‘It wasn’t Bayswater?’ remarked Martha.

Oh no! the woman was quite sure of that.

The result of it all being that, as Mr. Soper remarked in walking down the street, they were ‘as much in the fog as ever. There are three Warrens in Bayswater and four in Brompton,’ said he, ‘and the chances are that *our* Warren is in neither.’

‘Well, what are we going to do next?’ exclaimed Martha impatiently. ‘I’ve had enough of Messrs. Waggs, Waddy & Co.’

‘If you will accept a fool’s advice,’ said Mr. Soper, planting himself on the corner of Camden Road, ‘you will stroll due north, as far as Holloway Prison. The air in these parts is noted for its salubrity; and a glance at the castellated edifice I have mentioned is said to be very bracing to one’s morals.’

Thought Martha :

‘I could *kill* the odious creature! None but a man would ever have invented hanging!’ Then aloud : ‘And in the meantime, Mr. Soper——’

‘I shall follow the promptings of a constitutional thirst! I do not fail, of course, to recognise the prerogative of cold water; but I sit upon the opposition benches, and drink hot rum! Please be good enough to walk up one side of the road and down on the other, until I reappear.’

Martha scowled, and turned away.

‘Constitutionally stupid, I should imagine,’ she said. ‘No, he isn’t either; he’s as deep as the antipodes, and cunning as—as Fra Diavolo. Oh Marty, for shame!’

She faced around to look at the wretch, and saw him enter the Brecknock Arms.

CHAPTER IX.

OAK LODGE, HIGHGATE.

MR. SOPER'S first care, upon entering the Brecknock Arms, was to call for refreshment. Then he requested to see a local directory, which he examined, while he slowly stirred a tumbler of steaming whisky; the result being, that he added another Charles Warren to his already plethoric list. This done, and having disposed of the contents of the glass, he stepped once more into the street, and beckoned to a man who was watering one of a long line of cab-horses.

‘Look here!’ said he, ‘are you the waterman on this rank?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Can you point out the oldest cabman on the stand?—or rather, the one who has been longest on *this* stand, and knows the neighbourhood and the people well?’

‘That’s ’im, sir, as has jist druv up in a four-wheeler at the end o’ the stand. Do you want to speak to ’im, sir?’

‘Yes, when I’ve given you something for a glass of beer. Here! send him round to the private bar.’

‘Thank you kindly; ’is name is Topps, sir.’

‘Topps, eh! Well, you just tell Topps that a gentleman wants to see him.’

‘Yes, sir. Hi! hi! there! Topps!’ shrilled the water-man, and Mr. Soper had barely time to re-enter the hostelry, when Topps came shuffling in with a ‘My duty to you, sir, and did the gentleman want a word with me?’

He was certainly a note-worthy specimen of the genus cabby. His neck was enveloped in a great involuted woollen comforter, the rim of a limp and weather-stained ‘wide-awake’ hung like a blinker over his eyes, and he was ensconced in a wonderful cloak of a kind much affected by Irish patriots upon the stage; his face was seamed and corrugated by wind and rain, his nose was red, his eyes were over-fed fountains, his teeth were mostly gone, and take him all in all, he was a cabby such

as would have gladdened the heart of the late Mr. Leech.

‘Yes, Topps, I sent for you,’ said Mr. Soper, secretly conscious of an analogy between cabby’s cloak and his own, ‘and I am glad to see you. You are thirsty, of course, Topps ; you mostly are, I believe.’

‘You’re right, sir. It’s a nat’ral state for me to be parched, I believe, sir,’ said Topps, with great frankness. ‘I’ll take a little rum and spruce, miss’ (looking up at the barmaid and wiping his mouth with his sleeve), ‘if it’s agreeable to the gentleman.’

‘Certainly, Topps, fire away ; we’ve had ’em together before, eh ! old man ? Another of those nice whiskies of your’s, miss, with a slice o’ lemon in, please. And so, Topps, you’re still on the old stand, eh !’

‘Oh ! ah ! yes, sir ; the gentry hereabouts have taken such a likin’ to me, that I carn’t for the life of me get out o’ the neighbourhood. Your wery good ’elth, sir.’

‘Thank you, Topps. I suppose you know everybody about here ?’

“Topps, do you know everybody about ’ere ?” that were your obserwation, I believe, sir ?’

‘Certainly.’

‘ Well, sir, if you know a man wot wants to experiment on me to the ixtent of a ’arf crown, let him say to me, “ Topps, like a rocket now, ole man, to Hoxford Lodge !” an’ I’m there like that ;’ gulping down the remaining contents of his glass.

‘ Another rum and spruce, please, miss,’ said Mr. Soper to the young lady behind the bar.

‘ You’re werry kind, sir ; and then s’pose he says, “ Topps, it’s all a mistake, Topps, it’s No. 11, Brunsick Terrace.” I immegitly turns round and says, arter a few cracks of the whip, “ Brunsick Terrace, an’ I ’ope you’ll find her well, sir.”—Your werry good ’elth again. When the voice gets a little husky, sir, an’ the pipe wants m’istenin’, there’s a nothing as is ekal to three or four glasses o’ rum and spruce, sir. Thank’ee, I don’t mind if I *do* take *one* more, and as I was about to say, if the gent then turned round and said : “ Oh ! it’s all a lark, ole man, set me down to Haydon Willer,” I’d larf and do it, quick, and win my ’arf crown ; that’s what *I’d* do it, sir. Thank’ee, your werry good ’elth, an’ your missus’s.’

‘ Stop, old man !’ said Mr. Soper, in a tone of great solemnity ; ‘ do I look like a man who would be likely to have a missis ?’

Topps put down his glass, pushed aside his blinker, and appeared for a few seconds to be mentally casting up the sum of Mr. Soper's physical attractions; then he repossessed himself of his glass, and said in a tone of strong conviction :

‘I may be wrong, and I ’ope as you’ll be good enough to correct me if I *am* wrong, but I really *don’t* think, sir, as you’re a man as ud be likely to have a missis.’

‘Thank you, Topps,’ said Mr. Soper earnestly. ‘I *have* my weaknesses, of course, but I *wouldn’t* care to be accused of such a thing as that. I see that you understand me, Topps; few people do, Topps; but didn’t you mention Haydon Villa?’

‘Ay, sir, I did.’

‘Well, you see, I am interested in a lady who lived there year before last, and who has come into a fortune she knows nothing about, and if there is a cabman on the rank who remembers driving her with luggage to any other house, and will take me to that house, I think I’ve got a sovereign in my pocket for that cabman.’

Topps immediately took a seat, and fell into a meditative mood, which lasted so long that, thinking he must have dropped asleep,

Mr. Soper tapped him on the shoulder and said :

‘ Well, well, Topps, what have you got to say to my proposition ? You understand, I suppose ?’

‘ Ay, sir,’ said Topps, removing his hat and rubbing a bare and desolate expanse of scalp with his fist ; ‘ and the prop’sition is fair an’ honer’ble, and I don’t object to earning a sov. neither, fur it ain’t many o’ them as *I* see, sir. A party did once give me one in mistake for a bob one night in Harley Street, an’ I’d just druv round the corner from Cavendish Square too ; but s’help me ! I didn’t find it out till next morning, and not knowin’ the gent’s address, I couldn’t ractify the mistake, which ’as laid ’eavy on my mind ever since ; but this prop’sition is square and reg’lar twixt man and man, an’ ’spose now you say to me, “ Now, Topps, whether you did or did *not* take this party with luggage to another house, you just *find* that t’other house, and that sov.’s yours, you don’t find it, and it’s a free ride.” You’ve acted fair by me, an’ I’ll act fair by you. Come, now, sir, what d’ye say ?’

‘ All right, Topps,’ said Soper, ‘ but I don’t care about spending the whole afternoon in your cab, even if it *is* a free ride.’

‘Is it a bargain, sir?’

‘Certainly it is, but——’

‘Well,’ said Topps, crumpling up a very bleared eye into the similitude of a wink, ‘did you ever know a cabby, sir, as ’ud give a free ride for nothin’?’

‘Never!’ was Mr. Soper’s emphatic response.

‘We couldn’t afford it, you know, sir. It’s a ’ard life, sir, an’ bad enough by daytime; but by night espicially, when it rains, sir, an’ the public-’ouses is closed, and a man ’as got a twinge o’ rheumatiz in ’is back, an’ he’s ’ad a fare as purvented ’is gittin’ his supper, sir, an’ ’as neglected to purvide a bit o’ something cold to eat; an’ then ’as to wait all night, an’ don’t get another blessed customer—it aint all roses and feather-beds, that ain’t, sir. I can tell you though, there’s them as thinks as a cabby’s insides and stummick is made of brass-wheels and springs wot can be wound up and warrinted to run twenty-four hours without any greasin’. But as I was a goin’ to say, sir, as I sat there a thinkin’, it come in my mind as I knowed a cook as lived next door to Haydon Willer. You see, sir, it come about in this ’ere way. Her marster—an’ a ’arty old cock he was, too—’ad a werry bad

'abit o' comin home a bit preockerpied, as you might say, with the gin he'd drank convivial like with some other 'arty old cocks at a tavern in Aldersgate Street, as I knows on. An' the cook an' me, we 'ad a sort o' mutool arrangement (the missis, o' course *she*—you know—*she* put her up to it—I understood that) an' this arrangement was, that I should sorter lyter up an' down 'afore the tavern about the time the guv'ner usually begun to get meller, an' then he'd come out an' say, "Hello, Topps, is that you again, Topps?" an' I would say, "Yes, sir, I charnced to be a passin' by, an' as I havn't 'ad a fare since noon, I was a 'opin to run across you, sir;" an' he would say, "Since you *have* met me, Topps, drive me home, Topps, like the——" as I wouldn't mention what, sir, "for the missis," he would say, "will be turpentine, Topps, and bilin' pitch," an' so, when he got there, the cook an' me would lift him gently out of the bottom of the cab—which was 'is favourite place for a nap—an' carry 'im quitely upstairs. Then the cook—I never see the missis at all—had a 'arf crown and a plate o' cold beef an' a pint o' six allays ready for me. So me and her got thick, as you might say, an' if you'll be

good enough to jump into my cab, we'll just find out wot *she* knows about this ere business.'

Whereupon, Topps leading the way, they stepped into the street again, and then Mr. Soper for the first time explained, as he designated Martha in the distance, that a lady was interested in the matter—a client of his, who by this time must be impatient for his reappearance. This at once elicited a series of winks from Topps, which gave his face quite a cataleptic appearance, and which Mr. Soper felt it his duty to severely frown down. This done, he signalled to Martha from the cab window, and explained to her, when she had entered, the object of the present journey and the amount of the honorarium he had promised to Topps, which amount she immediately placed in his hands. By this time the cab had stopped a few doors below Haydon Villa, and Topps, after a brief pantomimic conference with Mr. Soper through the closed window, disappeared from view.

In a few minutes he returned with a face radiant with satisfaction. Mr. Soper pulled down the window and said :

‘ Well, Topps ?’

‘Well, sir; it was Biggles’s wan—we’ll soon find ’em now. I says to Mary, “Do you remember the people in Haydon Willer—them as moved away?”—“Yes,” she says.—“And do you remember, Mary,” I says, “the name on the wan as moved the furnitur’?”—“Yes,” she says, “Biggles—the very name of my fust young man,” she says, and now, sir, we’ll go to Biggles’s. I know ’im, in Kentish Town Road,’ with which Topps sprang upon the box, and flourishing his whip over the back of his gaunt Bucephalus, dashed, with much jingling and jangling upon the part of the crazy old vehicle, down the road, scraped with infinite din and clatter around the first corner, then straight ahead again, as if Topps were Tam O’Shanter, and every witch of the Brig o’ Doon were streaming behind him, then another corner, another burst through a crowded street, then a sudden pull-up, and there was Topps once more at the window, with:

‘’Ere’s Biggles’s, and I won’t be ’arf a minit, sir.’

In saying which he told a falsehood, for he was gone five minutes by Martha’s watch. Then he reappeared in triumph with a piece of paper in his hand.

‘Read that, sir,’ he said, ‘and tell me what’s written there, if you please?’

Martha, weary and impatient with the long delay, snatched at the paper, and read :

‘MR. CHARLES WARREN,
‘Oak Lodge,
‘Highgate.’

‘Aha!’ said Topps, exultingly ; ‘did I do it neat, sir, or didn’t I?’

‘Good, very good, old man,’ said Mr. Soper, without the slightest display of enthusiasm. ‘Now drive up to Highgate and find the place.’

When they were under way again he took his list of addresses from his pocket, and called Martha’s attention to the last entry therein.

‘There it is, you see, we should have found it in the end, but we have saved much time.’

Then he lapsed into a silence which lasted until they had climbed nearly to the summit of Highgate Hill. At the Crown and Vulture Topps stopped to make inquiries, and, it is to be feared, to recuperate his wasting energies. When he came out he said :

‘All right, sir, I’ll be there in ten seconds.’

He was about to mount the box again, when Mr. Soper detained him.

‘I think,’ said the latter, turning to Martha, ‘that we had better walk the remainder of the way,’ and as she warmly coincided in this opinion, they at once descended, and gave directions to Topps to await their return. Then, fully instructed as to the position of Oak Lodge, they set out upon their quest. Martha, by this time, was in a state of feverish excitement, and she once came very near fainting as a grey-haired gentleman, whom, at the first glance, she took for her father, stepped from a gate in a garden wall by her side. And when, after having several times mistaken the road, they were led by a butcher’s boy at last up to a stretch of dead wall, which might in mediæval times have served as an *enciente* to a moderate-sized village, and were informed that :

‘Yere yer are, guv’ner. Yere’s Hoak Lodge——’

Martha felt her legs tremble beneath her, and her breath come and go quickly, from a sense of propinquity to the woman she at last had hunted down.

Mr. Soper, noticing in her face a look of mingled perturbation and complacency, took

occasion to mention, as he surveyed the dimensions of the circumvallating mass of brick and mortar before him :

‘Yes, well, it *may* be Oak Lodge, Miss Summerfield, but by the look of that young beggar’s eyes, I wouldn’t be at all surprised (if we should succeed in borrowing a ladder in the neighbourhood and scaling the wall), to find that it is either a smallpox hospital, or a private lunatic asylum. I don’t want to discourage you, but that is my opinion.’

‘Let us walk around the place and see,’ suggested Martha, with a face, out of which the look of complacency had suddenly disappeared; ‘and we had better commence here, I think,’ she added, stepping into the middle of the road; ‘for I think the wall begins just where you stand. Yes, I am sure of it, for I can see the tops of a line of trees like an espalier, extending back at a right angle with the road. Come, I am going to satisfy myself, at any rate.’

So they walked slowly along the unpaved footpath until they reached a place where it was obvious there once had been a broad carriage entrance. But this was now filled in with modern yellow brick, flanked by two great stone pillars, upon one of which a stone

urn, honeycombed by the rain, and green with moss, gave nutriment, as it would appear—from a shaking of withered stems in the breeze—to a small community of disreputable summer weeds. This was a disappointing feature at once, and Martha hurried on without lifting her eyes to her companion's face. A hundred yards further on, the wall suddenly dropped to an altitude of about eight feet, and then terminated in a barn-yard door, which, thanks to a condition of general decrepitude, would have speedily yielded, it is to be feared, to the muscular shoulders of M. Porthos of the immortal 'Musketeers.' The stable windows, as Martha ascertained by stepping a few feet into the road, were for the most part broken; and the once gilded and flaunting weathercock upon the roof had degenerated through stress of weather into a miserable wheezy tatterdemalion, who no longer knew the east from the west, and whose tail had dribbled away in rust to a mere stump like a rabbit's.

Mr. Soper and Martha exchanged a look, the former of grim satisfaction, as much as to say, 'I told you so,' the latter of downright discouragement; then they turned into a narrow lane, where the high walls on either side

gave to it the appearance of a trench, and, a hundred yards or so further on, came to a wooden door studded with iron nails, and pierced by a wicket. Upon this they read the name of Oak Lodge. Martha gave at once a triumphant toss of her head, and exclaimed :

‘Well, Mr. Soper, you perceive that there could have been no guile in that “young beggar’s” eyes after all.’

Mr. Soper, who at this moment was endeavouring to open the wicket, suddenly faced around.

‘Why so?’ he demanded. ‘Was there never then a case of insanity in your family, Miss Summerfield?’

‘Good heavens, no! What do you mean by asking such a question as that?’

‘Oh, nothing; except that I feared you might be disagreeably reminded of the fact, that is all,’ and Mr. Soper, turning his back to Martha, applied his eye to the keyhole of the door.

A horrible suspicion suddenly flashed upon Martha’s mind, and she went to the length of seizing Mr. Soper by the arm.

‘Do you think,’ she said, gasping for breath; ‘Do you think it’s a *madhouse*?’

‘God knows!’ he answered; ‘but it looks

like something of the sort. No sane people would ever live in such a place as this, I am sure. Just put your eye to the keyhole, Miss Summerfield; don't keep it there long, for it's a very draughty keyhole, I can assure you,' he added, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, and making room for Martha's approach to the indicated point of espial.

She could see but little, however, beyond a patch of ragged lawn—a rustic summer-house, with its roofs all beaten in like a cracked skull—and a cluster of frowsy and unshorn shrubs, through the intertwisted branches of which, a long low house of red brick was visible at a distance of about fifty yards. No sign of life was anywhere discernible within the enclosure. The bushes, indeed, bent down and seemed to whisper to each other as if they were conscious that her eye was at the keyhole, and it boded no good to them; and a troop of sparrows wheeled about the summer-house as she looked, and then flew screaming away. It seemed to her that the blinds were pulled down at most of the windows, and her excited fancy, stimulated, perhaps, by a recollection of Jane Eyre, led her almost up to the point of believing that some of the upper casements were traversed

by iron bars. Then she was recalled by Mr. Soper's voice saying :

‘ There is somebody coming down the lane ; we had better not be seen here, I think, unless it is your intention to try and effect an entrance ; there may be another door further down, you know. Shall we go and see, or make a few inquiries in the neighbourhood first ?’

‘ I am sure I don't know what to do ; this place quite frightens me,’ said Martha, with a rueful look at her companion ; ‘ if you think that——but stop, here comes a cab, we *had* better go. And, dear me, Mr. Soper ! is the lane wide enough for it to pass us ?’

It was time the question was answered, for the vehicle—it was a hansom—was but a hundred feet distant, and—slowly feeling its way towards them—seemed to fill up the entire space between the walls. There chanced, however, to be, a short distance from where they stood, an opening in the opposite wall, into which, Mr. Soper leading the way, they took up a position, and waited until the cab should have passed. Suddenly, as the latter drew near, Martha gave a great start, and drew her veil down over her face. ‘ Look ! look !’ she whispered, pulling Mr.

Soper's sleeve; 'that's the woman! that's Mrs. Warren, I am *sure* of it.'

The occupant of the cab was, indeed, a woman, and as Mr. Soper was afterwards forced to confess, a very handsome woman, too, who certainly bore a very striking resemblance to the picture in Martha's locket. She gave them but a cursory glance in passing, then called to the driver to stop before the gate with the wicket, and descended from the cab. Mr. Soper and Martha, constrained for the sake of appearances to resume their walk, soon heard the sound of retreating wheels, the grating of a key in a lock, and the slamming of a heavy door. Then both by a common impulse turned and retraced their steps to the spot, and peered by turns through the draughty keyhole—Martha, for her part, being as yet too excited to speak. They saw nothing, however, to reward their curiosity beyond an occasional glimpse of some black object moving among distant shrubbery. In a few moments it disappeared entirely. Then Mr. Soper turned an unruffled face toward Martha, and said, in quite a professional tone: 'Well! is it she?'

By way of answer Martha seized her locket, opened it, and held it up for his inspection.

‘What do *you* think about it?’

‘I think,’ he answered, looking round for the bell, ‘that you are quite right. It is the woman.’

‘What are you searching for then, pray?’

‘For the bell, of course. I am glad the thing is nearly over. I had better go in with you, I think, for it may be a madhouse after all,’ he answered, making a dash at a brass knob in the wall.

‘Stop! and don’t be a fool, Mr. Soper, if you please,’ said Martha, indignantly thrusting his hand aside. ‘A pretty lawyer you must be! Why should I enter in such an unceremonious style, pray?’

Mr. Soper went through the ceremony once more of removing his hat.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said, ‘I have been labouring under a misapprehension, I perceive. I really thought you wished to find your father. Shall we return now to the cab?’ and he immediately led the way in that direction.

‘Yes, I think so,’ said Martha; ‘you forget that before I can confront Mrs. Warren, I must obtain some evidence as to whether my father is now with her or not.’

‘I do not see why, now that you are

satisfied as to *her* identity. You have but to enter boldly, and demand the information you desire,' said Mr. Soper, with a shrug; 'and this is indeed the course,' he added, 'which Mr. Palmer expects you to pursue.'

'Then Mr. Palmer is very much mistaken,' she retorted, quickly; 'and I presume, sir, that I can manage my affairs in my own way if I choose.'

Instead of disputing such an obvious fact, Mr. Soper merely observed that he was glad the weather had continued so fine, though he was afraid, from what he had heard, that Christmas turkeys would not be as cheap as usual this year, thanks, perhaps, to the increase of a penny in the pound in the income tax, though, after all, war *was* war, in spite of Mr. Bright and the French International Exhibition—and Abyssinians must be put down, even if turkeys went up.

'Little beast!' said Martha, under her breath. 'I'd like to stick a good sharp pin in him.'

Topps had been improving the 'shining hour, at the Crown and Vulture, to the extent of getting convivial with a friend in the tap-room—a dingy little man whom he at once presented to Mr. Soper.

‘Ere, sir,’ said he, hastily depositing an empty beer pot upon the counter, and touching his blinker with his then disengaged hand, ‘this ere, sir, ’s the gardener from Hoak Lodge—leastwise, he *were* the gardener—havin’ been discharged a day or two ago by his missis—am I right, George? it *was* a day or two ago, I believe? Yes? Well, I thought I warn’t mistaken; and you see, sir, if you harn’t yet found your way there, he’d be werry glad to pint it out to you—wouldn’t you, George?’

George immediately cleared his throat, and affirmed, in a husky way, that he would be delighted, to be sure.

‘He’s a wery accommodating young man, George is,’ said Topps, approvingly; ‘and, I think I heard you say, George, didn’t I, as you were in want of a sittivation? Yes, sir; that, you see, is what *he* is in want of—and, I say, George, if the lady and gent could help you to a sittivation, you wouldn’t mind tellin’ ’em what *you* know about Hoak Lodge, would you? and rum things you *do* know about Hoak Lodge, don’t you?’

George with no surcease of huskiness in his delivery, plainly intimated that he could tell a thing or two about Oak Lodge if he

wished. Whereupon, Martha gave Mr. Soper a look, which that gentleman found little difficulty in comprehending, and then asked if she could not be shown into the parlour, where she would wait until he was ready to escort her thence. He complied at once, and received on the threshold a sovereign, of which he was requested to make judicious use ; and with as little delay as possible. Thus adjured, he returned to the taproom, and was immediately accosted by Topps in a confidential tone. Said he :

‘George don’t want to say nothing again his missis, sir, an’ he wouldn’t—George wouldn’t, for the world—cos he’s a square man, as wants to get his livin’ honest—and he means to get it honest too—an’ he ought to, sir, for if there is a man as knows sun-flowers from tulip bulbs, that ere’s the man. Why, he inwented a new kind of sparrow-grass, all hisself, he did ; and he could do it, again, too, if he tried hard—George could. An’ he ain’t no drinkin’ man, neither. He don’t mind a pint with a gentleman now an’ then, of course—hevin’ manners enough not to refuse an inwitation from his betters.’

‘See here, old man,’ said Mr. Soper, promptly damming up the threatened deluge of incoherencies; ‘you go out and get a little fresh air, and I will take good care of your friend while you are gone. Come into the smoking-room with me, George,’ and leading the way, he quickly inducted that individual into an adjoining apartment, and closed the door behind him.

‘Now, George,’ he began; ‘I’m in a hurry. If you have got anything to say about Oak Lodge, say it, and if it is of any value to me you shall have a sovereign for your trouble, but you must be quick about it. Come now, fire away.’

And George, stimulated by the sight of the sovereign which Mr. Soper proceeded to spin upon the mahogany table, *did* ‘fire away’ to the following extent:

He had been living at Oak Lodge for upwards of a year, and though he had good wages and an easy place, he *couldn’t* say that he liked it altogether. Not that he had anything to say against his missis, for she was kind enough, and he had his beer, as regular as the clock, every day at eleven. And he wouldn’t say either as there was anything wrong about the house, because he had no

right to say as there *was* anything wrong at all ; only he *did* have his dreams, and he 'see and heard things' as was queer, to say the very least. And if he was asked particular by the gentleman if it was anything in the way of an old party who wasn't the missis's husband, and who was kept under lock and key in a room as had iron bars at the windows, he would say confidential that the gentleman was quite right, and though he didn't mind thunder in the least, it *did* make his blood run cold to hear a man screaming murder with all his might at two o'clock in the morning. Had he ever seen him ? Of course he had, and talked to him too, for there were times when he would be let out into the garden every day, for a week or more, and a pleasant-mannered gentleman he was too ; but the missis always stood by him, and prevented his saying very much. He had never been in the garden alone—George was sure of that, for, bless you ! her eyes were never off him for a single moment, when he was not in his room. Had he ever heard the name of Summerfield mentioned ? Had he ! well, he should think so ; many and many a time in the middle of the night he had started out of his sleep all in a tremble, and heard *that*

name ringing through the house—that's what he had done, and he wouldn't forget it very soon either. He had been discharged, he supposed, because he had been too inquisitive; just as if anybody *wouldn't* be inquisitive about such a rummy thing as that going on in the house where a man slept. Of *course*, he'd see the young lady, and answer any questions she'd like to ask him; why wouldn't he? he wanted to know.

Martha accordingly became a party to the conversation, and put some very incisive inquiries to George.

Was Mrs. Warren's maid named Parker? No, it wasn't nothing of the sort; it was 'Tilda Birch. And George thought he had the best right to know, as he was going to marry her just as soon as he could get a little more money together—they had £60 now between them—when he was going into the nursery business for himself down at Isleworth. He *had* heard of a maid by the name of Parker, only one though, and she was a bad lot, he believed, and had got married to some brewer down in the country. No, 'Tilda *hadn't* been on the Continent, and she didn't know any more about the mysterious old party than he did, and she would be very

glad to get away; he'd swear to that. As for a five-pound note, it would come very acceptable, and 'Tilda would be only too happy to meet her ladyship, and he had no doubt at all, but what she would find means to slip out of the house for half-an-hour or so on Monday evening; and, indeed, George was quite willing, if her ladyship would kindly designate the time and place, to guarantee 'Tilda's punctual attendance at the hour specified.

Martha thought that eight o'clock at the gate of Oak Lodge would probably suit her convenience. Then, having given George an additional sovereign as a retaining fee, she summoned Topps, consulted her watch, and instructed him to drive with the utmost celerity to King's Cross.

Her last words to Mr. Soper were :

'Tell Mr. Palmer that I am sure of seeing my father within a week, and of bringing confusion and ruin upon the woman in whose power he has so long been. You lawyers are very clever, I know, but you see I have been right in my surmises after all.'

'*Brutum fulmen !*' said the ungallant Mr. Soper between his teeth, as he turned his face in the direction of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

CHAPTER X.

MR. THOMAS DEXTER IN LUCK.

ABOUT the time that Martha's cab was leaving Lincoln's Inn Fields, another cab was driving in on the side nearest to the Gray's Inn Road. This latter, containing a solitary passenger, just arrived at King's Cross by the early express from Limeborough, by a strange coincidence, stopped in front of No. 101, and the passenger, upon alighting, proved to be none else than our friend, the Rev. Thomas Dexter. He was very pale, very excited in his manner, and in the opinion of the cabby, who coolly pocketed a half-crown for a shilling fare, a dipsomaniac of a pattern he should like to meet with at every street corner, thenceforth and for ever. He glanced up at the dingy windows, verified the number by reference to a letter which he took from his pocket, and then, entering the hallway, identified,

by further recourse to the letter, a name he found inscribed upon one of the door-jambs. Said he aloud, 'Krinkle, John Krinkle, Solicitor, Room No. 7; that appears to be quite correct,' and mounting the stairs, he was soon ushered into the presence of an elderly gentleman, occupying a dingy back office, who rose, upon his entrance, and expressed with great unction a hope that he found the Rev. Mr. Dexter in the enjoyment of that most inestimable of blessings, health, sir. Whereupon Mr. Dexter observed, after a preliminary cough; while he nervously brushed the top of his hat :

'I received, Mr. Krinkle, a letter from you last evening, which—which——'

'Which astonished you, sir, very much, I suppose,' suggested the lawyer; blandly adding: 'and I take it, sir, that you could not have been astonished in a more agreeable or satisfactory way?'

Mr. Dexter attested to the truth of this observation by laughing outright, and nodding his head in a highly gratified manner. Then, beginning to feel more at his ease, he placed his hat upon the table, removed his gloves, crossed his legs, and assuming something approaching to a tone of deliberation, said :

‘Well, Mr. Krinkle, business, I suppose, is business.’

‘Invariably so,’ Mr. Krinkle thought.

‘Consequently,’ pursued Dexter; ‘if you will be good enough to tell me the amount of the fortune I am to inherit, I shall be obliged to you, Mr. Krinkle.’

‘Certainly, Mr. Dexter: £30,000 personalty, for the most part Consols, I believe.’

‘Which I am to receive at the testator’s death?’

‘At the testator’s death; yes, sir.’

‘And in the interim I am to have an annuity of £500?’

‘Exactly so; my letter was explicit upon that point, I think,’ and adjusting his spectacles to his nose, Mr. Krinkle reached for a letter-book upon his desk, and insisted upon reading aloud the paragraph in question.

‘Yes, very well; that is explicit enough,’ said Dexter, more and more at his ease; ‘and now that we have settled the money question—though, by the way, when does this allowance begin? that is to say, when do I receive my first instalment, Mr. Krinkle?’

‘On the 1st of February.’

‘Very good; and now, as I was about to observe, since we understand each other fully

in regard to money matters, I should like to know, Mr. Krinkle, all that you are at liberty to tell me concerning this parent of mine. You used the word in the singular number, I believe ?'

Oh yes, Mr. Krinkle had used the word in the singular number beyond a doubt.

'In that case, Mr. Krinkle,' pursued Dexter, 'I should like to ask—but stop! Are you fully acquainted with my family history ?'

Mr. Krinkle's smile appeared to be so conclusive upon this point, that Dexter, a shade redder than usual, it is to be feared, immediately added :

'Yes, very well, Mr. Krinkle. I only wished to know whether I am to consider myself absolutely fatherless or not ?'

'Until you have an interview with my client, I should not, if I were in your case, bother my head about the matter at all,' said the lawyer, good-humouredly.

'By which I suppose I am to infer that for the present it is to remain a secret.'

For the present, yes, Mr. Krinkle thought.

'It is but natural, however, that I should feel deeply anxious upon the subject.'

Mr. Krinkle thought he could enter into

and understand Mr. Dexter's feelings exactly ; and he regretted that he could not overstep his instructions in the matter.

Mr. Dexter, reaching for his hat, and attentively surveying the lining a moment, remarked, in the subdued tone of a monologue, that :

‘ There always has been something inexplicable to me in the aspect of my family relations.’

Mr. Krinkle was not at all surprised at that.

‘ For, you see,’ continued Dexter, ‘ I was led to believe that I was an orphan and destitute of relatives, and yet——’

‘ And yet you somehow gravitated to Eton and Oxford, and finally into the Deadwick pulpit.’ Mr. Krinkle, putting himself in the reverend gentleman's place, was free to confess that he would have found these circumstances to be very surprising.

‘ You, I see,’ said Dexter, ‘ are my parent's confidant.’

‘ I am your parent's solicitor, sir, which, I presume, means pretty much the same thing.’

‘ Well, it seems a little hard that I should be debarred from all knowledge of my birth

and parentage. It would have been better, I think, to have deferred your communication until a time when you could have spoken without reserve upon the subject. As it is, if you are *not* at liberty to enter into details, I can see no adequate reason for your concealing from me the essential facts of the case.'

Mr. Dexter had raised his voice a little, and was now looking the solicitor earnestly in the face.

'And what, sir,' demanded the latter, 'would you consider as the essential points of the case?'

'Well, first and foremost, I should think,' said Dexter, once more examining the lining of his hat, 'would be the question of—of—(the circumstances of the case prompt the inquiry, sir) the question of my legitimacy.'

'I have no hesitation in saying that your mind may be at ease upon that point; although the marriage of your parents was a clandestine one,' said Mr. Krinkle, with emphasis.

'Their social position was——?'

'Unexceptionable in every respect. Again, Mr. Dexter, I am able to answer your

inquiries without overstepping the bounds of duty.'

'And I was born in England, I presume?'

'In Oxfordshire—yes.'

'Of a happy marriage?'

'Originally it was so.'

'And ultimately?'

'Quite the reverse, into the particulars of which I am not at liberty to enter.'

There was an interval of silence; then Dexter, by this time quite nervous and excited, again asked :

'Is my name in reality Thomas Dexter?'

'So far as it goes—yes, sir.'

'There is a surname, then?'

Mr. Krinkle laughed.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'but as I must draw the line somewhere, I will draw it here, if you please. My client will answer your question, without any doubt. I, myself, have no authority for doing so.'

Dexter, feeling that the most ingenious system of catechetics would fail to extort further information from this man, gave it up at once as a bad job, contenting himself with asking, as he rose from his chair :

'Shall I meet my—your client soon, do you think, Mr. Krinkle?'

Mr. Krinkle thought that such a thing could be brought about within a week or ten days. He would, in any event, use his best endeavours to hasten an event which his reverend friend must, in the nature of things, look forward to with no little anxiety and impatience.

Whereupon, Mr. Dexter took his departure in very excellent spirits, despite his failure to solve the mystery of his parentage. To tell the truth, he was consoled by the reflection that beyond all surmise and peradventure the substantial fact remained that he was the prospective inheritor of £30,000. Bearing this in mind, he went over to the Freemason's Tavern, and ordered for dinner a basin of clear turtle soup, sole au gratin, poulet à la Marengo, and an omelette soufflée, which he washed down with a bottle of frappéed Pommery, a demi-tasse, and a glass of green Chartreuse. Then he jumped into a hansom and drove to King's Cross, having just twelve minutes in which 'to catch' the afternoon express for Limeborough. In leaving the cab, he did what was until this day an unprecedented thing in his history; that is, he handed up a half-crown to the driver, and then bolted into and through the

booking-office, crossed the platform, and tumbled all out of breath into a first-class carriage, just as the guard was waving his green flag as a signal to the engine-driver to proceed.

‘Whew!’ he said, throwing himself back in the seat, and as quickly rising again as he recognised Martha Summerfield sitting in the further corner of the carriage. ‘Well! well! this *is* an unexpected pleasure.’

If a cynical person had been inclined to attribute the colour in Dexter’s face to a copious indulgence in Messrs. Pommery and Greno’s excellent wine, he certainly could not have traced the existence of carmine in the texture of Martha’s temples to the same cause, for she had been simply regaling herself at the station with a bath-bun and a cup of tea. The colour was there, nevertheless, as she put out her hand to greet him.

They were quite alone in the compartment. So Dexter, upon whose ‘bump’ of audacity the champagne had exerted a visible influence, immediately took a seat beside her.

‘Of all persons in the world,’ he began, ‘you are the last I expected to meet in London, Miss—may I not call you Martha?’

‘Well,’ she answered, laughing, ‘“a rose

by any other name——” No, I don’t mean that either.’

‘Quite right,’ interposed Dexter; ‘don’t be a rose. Not, however, that you would not be “Queen” in Tennyson’s “rose-bud garden of girls”—for you *would*; but I’d much rather you were a forget-me-not upon this and, indeed, upon all future occasions.’

‘In view of your kindness to me, I can safely promise that, Mr. Dexter——’

‘Oh don’t!’ he exclaimed petulantly—‘don’t mister me, please. Call me Dexter—no; call me Tom, and then I shall feel that I can say Martha with impunity.’

‘Would not that be a terrible liberty to take with a clergyman’s name?’ she demurely asked. ‘Fancy calling a bishop Jack, or Bill, or Bob!’

‘I said Tom.’

‘Well, Tom; which would be just as bad.’

‘But, you see,’ he urged, ‘I am *not* a bishop, and probably in a very short time I shall cease even to be a clergyman; so, that objection being removed, you will please call me Tom at once.’

‘I’ll do nothing of the sort, sir, until you explain what you mean by your extraordinary language.’

‘Simply this, then. The Deadwick living will shortly figure in the advertising columns of the *Ecclesiastical Gazette*. I am going to sell out.’

‘As one would a commission in the army!’ exclaimed Martha, aghast.

‘Exactly so!’ and Dexter seemed highly amused by the look of blank astonishment that appeared in her face.

‘Well,’ she went on, ‘I *am* surprised; but before I ask how such a traffic in the cure of souls is possible, I want you to tell me your object in seceding from the Church. Is the calling distasteful to you?’

‘Very.’

‘And why?’

‘Primarily, because as a clergyman I am an anachronism.’

‘Again, why?’

‘Because I properly belong to the days when the Tenth Leo reigned, and Luther, the obscure friar, had not yet determined to defy the thunderbolts of the triple-crowned Zeus; when all the gods of the Pantheon figured in Bembo’s despatches, and in the fine pagan spirit of the time—God, Christ, and the Virgin were rechristened Jove, Apollo, and Diana.’

‘And Leo crowned Querno with cabbage-leaves, and permitted the poor clown to drain the heel-taps of his Infallibility’s glass and lick the holy platter clean—all this in the “golden days” the Liverpool gentleman so sweetly sang of. You know your *Roscoe* well, Mr. Dexter; and upon my word, I believe you are a pagan and an unbeliever—are you?’

Dexter laughed.

‘Yes and No,’ he said; ‘as between cowl, crozier, and caduceus, my preference goes with the latter upon the score of picturesqueness: I certainly prefer *Psyche* to *St. Ursula*, *Achilles* to *Peter the Hermit*, and I truly think the *Odyssey* is a much cleverer book than the *Revelation*.’

Martha uplifted a pair of bristling eyebrows and wondering eyes.

‘For mercy’s sake, stop a moment!’ she cried; ‘and tell me why, with such opinions, you embraced the sacred calling?—for sacred calling it is universally considered to be.’

‘Oh, the thing was a present to me, you see!’

‘The thing?’

‘The living—yes. I didn’t want it, but it was thrust upon me, and I had no other resource.’

‘Well, I don’t know much about these matters; but it seems to me I have heard

tell of an oath, or something of that kind, a clergyman is obliged to take——'

'To avoid the "detestable sin of simony." Just so. But as *I* made no simoniacal payment for my preferment, I have no qualms of conscience upon the subject whatever.'

'You take refuge in a quibble. Is that strictly honest?'

'Well, as I have said, Martha, my presentation to the benefice was through no act of mine; and even if it had been, I should have a thousand precedents for so doing. The thing is done every day. If you don't believe me, study the advertisement columns of the *Times* for a week, and you will find that there is a regular market of souls in England, in which ecclesiastical functions are openly sold, bartered, and exchanged. There is, I believe, a *Mark Lane Express*, the organ of the Corn Exchange, in which you will learn all about the price of oats, barley, and things agricultural generally; similarly, if you wish at any time to learn the state of the clerical market, just take in the *Ecclesiastical Gazette*, and run your eye over the formidable list of advowsons and next-presentations for sale, and you'll be astonished, I am sure. Why, I know a fellow who bought a living in one of

the Midland counties because he had to preach but one sermon a day, and *there was such good shooting over the glebe!*

‘Then,’ said Martha, ‘it is the old story over again, of the money-changers in the temple; only, that in these latter days no *Master* has arisen to purify the holy places of their presence. What do your bishops do, Mr. Dexter?’

Dexter laughed again.

‘Do!’ he repeated. ‘Well, I’m blessed if I know. They induct young fellows into their benefices (or at least their ordinaries do), they draw their meagre salaries with great regularity, encourage the manufacture of lawn, issue marriage-licences to very ardent lovers, and contribute by a liberal display of millinery to the general picturesqueness of the annual openings of Parliament; that is about all, I believe.’

‘Thanks, very much. I *had* heard that—when objectionable people got into the pulpit by means of a cheque-book or otherwise, and *openly* misbehaved themselves—a bishop could then play the part of a Jupiter Tonans and annihilate the offender. Is that so?’

Mr. Dexter was obliged to admit that there was a grain or two of truth in the

suggestion ; but since '*Circumspice*' was the motto of the brotherhood to which he belonged, he was sure such episcopal functions were more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

Martha, however, was 'on the war-path.' She was silent a moment, and then she returned to the charge.

'But what I cannot understand,' she went on, 'is this: How can a man whose brains and aptitude for a profession appear to be deposited at his bankers, subject to a draft at sight—how can such a man, and by what means does he, become eligible to the honour you allege it is so easy to attain? I mean no offence ; but take your own case. You profess to a dislike for your profession, and yet you are in it. You admit that you entertain sentiments widely at variance with the doctrines you publicly profess. Why is this? The doors to your calling cannot be left wide open for the entrance of every chance comer or adventurer, that is certain. There *must* be a shibboleth of some sort. What is it ?'

'Oh ! pshaw !' said Dexter ; 'it is as easy as falling out of a window or going into trade. You simply go in for orders, that is all. It

is merely to say, I believe this, I believe that, and the other. It is not of the slightest consequence whether you believe it or not.'

'Oh !'

'Certainly not. I agreed to everything—took it, as it were, *en bloc*, and studying up afterward, found out what I had done. You see it was so much to take in all at once ; there are so many of the articles, to begin with, and strict orthodoxy, you know, gulps everything without looking at it—horned devil, sulphurous hell, Jonah, Joshua, and the rest, and digests it, too, it would appear. Now, I am troubled occasionally by twinges of conscience, which I fancy is a sort of dyspepsia of the moral faculties, and I felt worried at what I had done, until one of our bishops got into a fine quarrel with the Pentateuch, an old enemy of mine, when, such is the force of example, I experienced a very decided sensation of mingled relief and satisfaction. You see—let me whisper it in your ear—I was a great admirer of Voltaire, and knew pretty much what he thought of Moses ; but I must confess that his words made me shiver, until our own anointed stepped forward, truncheon in hand, and laid most of the patriarchs low. Then, remember-

ing the common prejudice and the most uncommon ignorance in regard to Voltaire's works, I committed to memory these remarkable words:—after commenting in the severest terms upon the massacre of the Midianites, Voltaire goes on to say: "Avouons qu'humainement parlant, ces horreurs révoltent la raison et la nature. Mais si nous considérons dans Moïse le ministre des desseins et des vengeances de Dieu, tout change alors à nos yeux; ce n'est point un homme qui agit en homme, c'est l'instrument de la Divinité à laquelle nous n'avons aucun compte à demander: nous ne devons qu'adorer et nous taire!" Strange words for an infidel, are they not?

"A fine bit of sarcasm, if read between the lines, and quite worthy of the great scoffer, *I* should say," said Martha.

Dexter laughed.

"Bother Voltaire!" said he, "and bother Moses; we've had enough of this. Call me Tom, that's a good girl."

Observing the increased redness of his face, it began to dawn upon Martha that perhaps the reverend gentleman had taken more champagne than was strictly good for him.

‘Critical people would call this bathos, would they not?’ she quietly demanded.

He laughed again, seized her hand, and kissed it.

‘Don’t know, I’m sure,’ he said; ‘but *I* call it *nice*.’

Martha flounced at once into another seat.

‘You forget yourself, Mr. Dexter!’ she said, but there was no alarming degree of severity in her voice, after all. He was about to follow, when the train glided slowly into a station, and he exclaimed:

‘Oh! bother! here we are at Inopportune Junction; and I say, porter—porter! there must be plenty of room in the next compartment. Oh dear, dear! this is *too* bad!’

Too late, however! Materfamilias, red with exertion—three exiguous feminine sprigs of the family tree—and one tart-encumbered and perspiring scion of the same house, came tumbling, pell-mell, with various awkward and many-angled impedimenta, into the carriage.

Martha immediately dropped the window, and became absorbed in the contemplation of a semaphore by the road-side. Dexter pulled from his pocket a copy of the *Times*, and

proceeded to an examination of the money article. The train moved on. Materfamilias had a fund of loquacity on hand of which she wished to disburden herself, and liking Martha's face, as she assured her, she straightway opened the sluice-gates of the conversational stream, and overwhelmed our heroine in a torrent of domestic commonplace. The three exiguous sprigs had just recovered from the measles. The tart consumer, who made quite an archipelago of raspberry seeds upon Dexter's trousers before he was discovered in the act, had fallen down his grandmother's stairs that very morning, surviving the mishap as by a miracle. Of the remaining nine at home, John, the eldest, who was studying stenography, had high hopes of becoming editor of the *Times* some day; while Algernon, apprenticed to a wine merchant in the city, already knew Portugal from Wapping, and could tell without the slightest hesitation that claret came from France, and moselle from Moselle, which latter country, materfamilias believed, was somewhere on the Continent.

Thus, *ad nauseam*, thought Dexter, who, in desperation, at last took an old envelope from his pocket, and having scrawled a few words in pencil upon it, slipped it, under

cover of the newspaper, into Martha's hand. Glancing down, she read :

‘ Hang the old woman !’

Martha whipped out her pencil in turn and wrote :

‘ I think she is very *nice*.’

Dexter, making a grimace at this, quickly answered :

‘ I see ; you are cross with me.’

She nodded back a vigorous acquiescence, and he tried to seize her hand beneath the *Times*, when the tart consumer, standing upon the seat, suddenly lost his balance, and, taking an unexpected header into Dexter's lap, irretrievably ruined the whole business.

To add to the general discomfiture, Limeborough now appeared in sight, and a moment later Lottie Cadmus herself, standing upon the railway platform, dawned upon the reverend gentleman.

‘ Never mind,’ he whispered to Martha—
‘ never mind ; I shall not give it up so, rest assured.’

CHAPTER XI.

PARMI LES AVEUGLES LES BORGNES SONT ROIS.

As Martha was dressing for dinner the following evening, the postman brought her a letter. Opening it, she read as follows :

‘ 101, Lincoln’s Inn Fields,

‘ December 19th, 1867.

‘ DEAR MISS SUMMERFIELD,

‘ Mr. Soper has acquainted me with the gratifying results of your inquiries in Camden Town and elsewhere yesterday, and I take the liberty of urging upon your acceptance the course of action I have already indicated to you. Clandestine interviews with servants, who may betray you without the slightest compunction to their employer, will in all probability defeat the object you have in view, and diminish your chances of ultimate success in the matter. Without

asking you to coincide with my views, which, I am free to say, have been rather strengthened than otherwise by yesterday's results, I still trust you will act upon my suggestion, and call upon Mrs. Warren at the *earliest practicable moment*. The result, I am sure, will justify the persistency with which I have forced my convictions upon your notice.

‘ Respectfully yours,
‘ HENRY PALMER.’

Martha, having read this communication, threw it aside with a gesture of impatience.

‘ Pshaw ! he would have me spoil the whole business. I shall do nothing of the sort,’ she exclaimed, applying herself with renewed assiduity to the completion of her toilette. This was accomplished at last under many difficulties ; for the room was not much larger than a packing-case ; the mirror upon the chest of drawers—the latter serving as dressing-table for want of space—was bleared and indistinct, and was traversed through the centre by a ragged fissure, which led to Martha’s face being repeated, as it were, in segments. Nevertheless, she appeared to be quite satisfied with herself ; and, holding the candle above her head, gave a look of critical

approval at her *coiffure*. Said she, with a complacent smile : ‘ And now, Miss Lottie Cadmus, since all is fair in love and war—and this promises to be a case of both love, and war to the knife—we shall see who wins to-night, you or I. Oh ! there’s the carriage, and of course Mr. Charles Smythe has come with it, and will torment me all the way to Limeborough. Bother the fellow !’

A knock at the door immediately followed. Then Katty brought her word that Mr. Cadmus’s coachman was waiting below for Miss Summerfield.

‘ But where is Mr. Smythe ?’ demanded Martha in some surprise.

Not having the slightest knowledge of that young gentleman’s whereabouts, Katty said so at once.

‘ He is not then in the carriage ?’

‘ Oh no !’ Katty was certain of that. She thought, however, that the coachman might be thirsty after his long drive.

To which Martha retorted, in some humour, that she did not keep an inn for the refectation of coachmen, and that she thought it was an extraordinary thing that Mr. Smythe had *not* called ; she couldn’t understand it at all.

In this frame of mind she entered the

brougham, and so continued until the purlieus of Limeborough were reached. Here, thinking of the ordeal before her, she suddenly became nervous, and felt her heart breaking into a lively pit-pat as the horses, with a snort of recognition, dashed through the open gateway and up to the door of 'The Elms.'

Lottie Cadmus received her very graciously; and Mr. Cadmus, rising from a controversial bout with Sir John Pericardium, M.P., then suffering from a congestion of his early theological opinions, greeted her with a warmth which she felt to be a trifle embarrassing. Then, casting her eyes over the assembled guests, twelve or fifteen in number, she saw Dexter at one end of the drawing-room, his face partly concealed by a lady's chignon, bending over a case of Flaxman's cameos, in which he obviously took but a feeble interest, as his eyes were steadily fixed upon hers. She remarked that the lady was a blonde, a palpable giggler, and that her blue silk was trimmed with Spanish point. But just then an occultation of this suspicious beauty took place. Charley Smythe, rising from a seat behind the window curtains—whence it is to be feared his thoughts had been taking some gymnastic flights among the stars—suddenly

crossed the room, blotting out Dexter and the blonde in his passage, and bore down upon Martha.

However, as fate would have it, Dr. Colfax at that moment started up in front of her, like a jack-in-the-box, and, with a prefatory inquiry as to her health, led her straightway into the conservatory 'to see the poinsettas,' as he explained to Lottie Cadmus, who intercepted them at the door.

They had to descend several steps; then, entering what seemed to be a grove of acacia-trees, he motioned her to a seat beside a mass of rock-work, whence water slowly oozed and fell with an intermittent tinkle into a basin below.

'Well, doctor, were are the poinsettas?'

'Oh hang the poinsettas! Red rags on a stick, only fit to worry bulls with. One Marshal Neill rose is worth an acre of them. What was your father's Christian name?'

Martha's heart began to flutter. A revelation was coming.

'Charles,' she answered.

'Charles Summerfield, of Brasenose, who took a chancellor's prize, and carried off the Ireland Scholarship in his seventh term?'

'Yes—yes.'

‘Stroke of the university crew and winner of the first race in outriggered eights from Mortlake to Putney?’

‘Oh dear, yes; I believe so!’

‘Jove, I thought as much. I knew him well. I was coxswain of the dark-blues that year and have grown a little since, you perceive. He was a combination of india-rubber and cast-iron, had the staying power of a steam-engine, could “cram” like a glutton, drink like a gentleman, fight like a Turk, and was, by all odds, the best fellow in his set. I am proud to know his daughter; and, Gad! she does the old boy credit too!’

‘It is very kind in you to say so, I am sure,’ returned Martha, with a suitable display of colour; ‘but oh! sir, we may be interrupted at any moment; *do* tell me the nature of that mystery!’

‘Mystery, bosh!—there *was* no mystery, only a thundering row between your father and that magnificent wife of his. You ought to know all about it; what was he thinking of that he never told you?’

‘Oh, sir, I don’t know; but please go on.’

The doctor wagged his head slowly.

‘Ah, she was a grand woman, this mother of yours—the loveliest gunpowder-magazine

that ever went about upon two legs. You do not remember her, of course. Her father lived just out of Oxford; and as he was the biggest donkey for the size of his ears in the county, he determined that she should marry a certain Sir John Pericardium, who by the way is in the drawing-room there, now, talking to Mr. Cadmus;—you will see him presently—and this asinine performance caused the whole precious row.’

Martha was dumbfounded.

‘Why, sir, I do not understand you. My mother died *after* my father’s disappearance, and there is nothing I remember better than her dear face. Moreover, she was *not* from Oxford. She was a French lady, and her maiden name was Dessart.’

The doctor immediately put on his spectacles.

‘What, what!’ said he. ‘Hum, hum! well, I *did* think I knew something about the affair; but I give it up as a bad job.’

‘Oh, sir!——’

There was a sudden movement in the shrubbery; and Charley Smythe stood before them.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you,’ said he, ‘but dinner is on the table and I’m commissioned

by my cousin to be Miss Summerfield's escort.'

Dr. Colfax experienced a sensation of immense relief; to which succeeded certain qualms as to his own possible delinquencies toward a corpulent lady in claret-coloured silk, in whose company he shortly appeared in the dining-room, and who proved to be Martha's *vis-à-vis* at the table.

Charley appeared to be very much pre-occupied in his manner, and the soup passed off without a word. Then, as a broadcloth arm was interposed between them, with 'Chablis, sir?' and a low hum of conversation commenced to run round the table, he turned, after taking a sip of his wine, to Martha, and said:

'I called yesterday, Marty.'

'Yes, I know,' she answered.

'Katty couldn't remember that you left any message for me.'

'Couldn't she?'

'Well, *did* you, Marty?'

'I told her to say to you that I had gone to London; certainly.'

'Not very much of a message, that.'

'It was all I had to give, at all events.'

At this point, Lottie Cadmus, on Charley's

left, turned round to him, and said, in a tone quite audible to those beside her :

‘ You appear to be in the sulks, my cousin.’

‘ I’d rather be in the sulks than in somebody’s boots, that I know of,’ answered Charley, with a significant look at Dexter, who sitting just opposite, returned his scowl with interest, and demanded :

‘ Who is the man ?’

‘ It isn’t a *man* at all,’ said Charley, quickly, ‘ nor yet a woman,’ he added, as he intercepted a look of intelligence passing between Martha and Dexter. ‘ Women are—well, I can’t say what they are—but they *have* got souls bigger than pins’ heads in their bodies.’

‘ I should hope so,’ said Lottie, ‘ such atomies, in spite of the Establishment, would be sure to get lost or trampled upon in the crush of bigger souls at the resurrection, I am afraid.’

‘ Oh, the little ones will be turned into wasps and beetles and poodle dogs long before that,’ said Charley, in a tone of conviction, and once more addressing his remarks to Dexter.

There chancing to be a lull in the con-

versation at this point, Charley's words had reached the other end of the table.

'Is our American friend a believer, then, in the transmigration of souls?' demanded the rector of St. John's.

'I don't know about that,' said Charley, with great promptness. 'I was alluding to little souls, and in their case, I should think *emigration* would be the better word.'

This reply had a curious effect upon the company. Mr. Cadmus smiled, Dr. Colfax laughed outright, while his partner raised her glasses and surveyed this flippant youth from over the seas. Sir John Pericardium, in a practical mood, assured his neighbour that emigration in the abstract was an excellent thing, as it tended to weed out the lower orders, and in the case of Ireland, had certainly worked wonders; whereupon the blonde young lady, until now dubious as to the propriety of the thing, leaned forward and bestowed an encouraging smile upon Charley, who was just then engaged in drinking his third glass of champagne. Dexter, conscience-goaded it may be, looked decidedly red and uneasy.

'I understand neither Mr. Smythe's meaning nor his allusions,' said he, as the hum of

conversation began again, 'but I can tell you what my opinion is of amateur theology.'

'Let us hear it then,' said Charley, when Martha, whose mind until then had been filled with disquieting reflections as to the meaning of Dr. Colfax's words, suddenly interposed with :

'Never mind, Mr. Dexter, we know what your opinion *ought* to be. Let that suffice. Polemics induce indigestion.'

'And heart-burn,' suggested the doctor, who it appeared had lost none of this conversation.

Lottie hoped it would not be so in the present instance, at all events.

A long pause ensued.

'As for me,' said Charley, at last motioning to the butler for more champagne, 'I don't profess to have any knowledge of theology, or of anything else worth speaking about.'

'At this rate we shall soon come to an agreement,' interposed Martha.

'But,' he continued, 'I have good intentions.'

'Which are mostly in the subjunctive mood, I am afraid, Mr. Smythe,' said Martha again.

'Never mind,' said Charley, reddening. 'I

know what mood *I* am in just at present, and it isn't for joking either,' and he tossed off his glass of champagne at a gulp. 'As I was about to say,' he resumed, 'my intentions are always good, whatever my theological delinquencies may be. I don't know much about the Thirty-nine Articles, but I know that I mustn't steal, even as much as the good name of a stranger, and the love which another may bear for him. I know that I should not creep into a friend's house or a woman's heart under false pretences. I know that it is my duty to help a brother in distress; and that under no circumstances should I bear false witness against my neighbour—*that*, Mr. Dexter, I believe, is in the Ten Commandments, is it not?' fixing a very searching look upon his reverend *vis-à-vis*, who made a scarcely perceptible inclination of his head by way of reply.

'You see,' continued Charley, turning first to Martha and then to Lottie, 'you see, I wasn't even sure upon *that* point.'

'Well,' said Lottie, putting on her gloves, 'you must postpone the discussion until we meet in the drawing-room, and'—lowering her voice—'remember that "Our American Cousin" never quarrels.'

Charley smiled grimly, but made no reply. When the ladies had retired, he seized a claret-jug and began to drink Lafitte like a fish.

‘The young beggar means mischief,’ said Dexter to himself. ‘I can see it in his eyes.’

Charley passed over the jug to Dr. Colfax, without appearing to notice the presence of Dexter.

‘That’s the right sort,’ he said, ‘there’s no American logwood in that.’

‘By the way,’ said Mr. Cadmus, overhearing the remark, ‘there is a terrible creature in your part of the world called “tangle-legs.” What is it like?’

‘I have never been far enough west to know exactly. I have never *heard* a man ask for a glass of vitriol and a sandwich at a luncheon-counter, but they do consume a good deal of the stuff out there, I believe, and benzine, too.’

‘I should think the stuff would consume them rather,’ said Mr. Cadmus; ‘and there is another potent fluid, too, called “Jersey lightning,” I think.’

‘Now,’ said Charley, laughing, ‘I can give you a bill of particulars. “Jersey lightning” is New York slang for “apple-jack”—a most

delicious spirit made from cider—the colour of amber, and as fragrant as—as—a girl's breath.'

From all this one might be led to believe that Mr. Smythe's ill-temper was gradually subsiding. But such was far from being the case. One *can* smile with proud flesh in one's vitals. An image too deep for obliteration was stereotyped into his senses; the image of Dexter, the sham hero, the fustian-knight, the false priest, posing as the saviour of the woman, he (Charley) so dearly loved; and it required but very little to excite him to the extreme point of exacerbation.

That point, as might be expected under the circumstances, was soon reached. After a few minutes of desultory conversation, Mr. Cadmus spoke up again:

'By-the-bye, Mr. Dexter,' he said, 'I have forgotten to congratulate you on your achievement of the other day. That was really very remiss in me, for I should have mentioned it in the lady's presence.'

Every eye at the table was immediately fixed upon Mr. Dexter; then the collective glances as quickly gravitated back to Mr. Cadmus again, and assumed an interrogative nature.

The inevitable exceptions to this performance were limited to Mr. Smythe and Dr. Colfax. The former instantly faced round to Dexter. The latter turned and surveyed Mr. Smythe with an intensity only to be explained upon the supposition that he was in quest of some rare physiognomical phenomena.

‘Yes, gentlemen,’ pursued Mr. Cadmus, with the air of one who wishes to be both arch and complimentary, ‘our reverend friend, I hear, was guilty the other evening of a noble and chivalrous action, to which is due the life, and the presence here this evening, of one of our fairest guests.’

While every glance was once more centred upon the blushing parson, the butler, under pretence of refilling a decanter, whispered in his master’s ear.

‘All right, Briggs, bring it to me at once.’

The butler, gliding noiselessly from the room, instantly reappeared with a newspaper, which he placed into Mr. Cadmus’ hands.

‘This evening’s *Limeborough Herald*,’ explained the latter, opening the sheet and glancing down the columns. ‘Ah! here it is;’ and Mr. Cadmus read aloud a glowing panegyric on the courage and intrepidity, with

which the Reverend Mr. Dexter, incumbent of the Deadwick parish church, had plunged into the frozen waters of the river Ooze, and rescued, at imminent peril to himself, one of his most esteemed lady parishioners. Blood-curdling details of the affair filled half a column, and the apotheosis of Thomas Dexter, hero and benefactor of his race, it would appear, was complete when Mr. Cadmus laid down the paper, and all eyes being once more concentrated upon the reverend gentleman, the latter's ear-drums tingled with a rolling fire of congratulations.

When this was through with, everybody was astonished to see Mr. Smythe, white to the very lips, and an angry red light in his eyes, rise to his feet and, pointing to Dexter, exclaim :

‘ This man, gentlemen, is no hero ; he sits here and accepts praises to which he has not a shadow of claim. He did not perform this action over which you make such a prodigious fuss ; I truly believe that, sooner than wet his skin, he would see his own mother drown. There is no such thing as courage or heroism in him.’

Everybody had risen, and was staring aghast at the speaker.

‘If he *has* a spark of manhood in him,’ continued Charley, ‘he will speak the truth in answer to a question I am going to ask in the presence of you all. Mr. Dexter,’ he added, facing round to that individual and looking him over from head to foot, ‘did *you* save Miss Summerfield’s life, or did *I*? Stop one moment before you answer. Remember the sacredness of your calling. Remember that you stand in the presence of gentlemen, who will surely one day judge you, if you commit yourself to a falsehood. Now, sir, answer me!’

A deathly silence fell an instant upon the company, broken only by the tinkling of a piano in the drawing-room, and a subdued hum of distant voices. Then Dexter, livid with rage and apprehension, turned toward Mr. Cadmus and said :

‘Was I invited here for this, Mr. Cadmus? Is it expected that I am to submit with impunity to such insults as these?’

Before Mr. Cadmus could reply, Charley interposed with : ‘I have been equally insulted by your cool acceptance of praises to which, as I have said, you have not a shadow of claim. I have asked you a simple question—will you answer it or not?’

‘Come, now, that is fair enough,’ said the doctor. ‘If you saved the lady’s life, you surely need not be bashful about it.’

‘Well, gentlemen,’ said Dexter, while a scornful smile appeared upon his lips, ‘since you seem to require that I should answer this young savage, I will say that I *did* save Miss Summerfield’s life.’

Charley turned furiously upon him.

‘You are a fraud and a humbug, Mr. Dexter, and if these gentlemen knew it as well as I know it, and a horse-whip or two were handy, I know perfectly well what would then happen to you!’

‘Gentlemen! gentlemen!’ interposed Dexter, ‘*must* I endure this? Call in the young lady and question *her*.’

‘Stop! no you won’t. Are you not content with being a liar? Has your ambition no limits, that you aspire to be a blackguard as well?’

Dexter made a menacing gesture over the table.

‘What!’ and quick as a flash, Charley seized a brimming glass of claret and dashed it into Dexter’s face.

A scene of wild confusion ensued. The ladies, quickly apprised of the occurrence, came

crowding into the room, and pressed about Dexter, whose throat, it was thought, had been cut; such a distressing spectacle was he, with hair, eye-lashes, whiskers dripping wet, and his shirt-collar and tie saturated, as it would seem, with blood. Lottie nearly fainted away at first. The blonde gasped 'Murder!' three times, and sank exhausted into a chair. Martha, promptly understanding the difficulty, as she thought, was furious with rage. In the midst of it all, Charley stood with his back against the mantel-piece, white as a corpse, with a heaving chest and dilated nostrils, and glared defiance at the assembled company.

Then Mr. Cadmus stepped up to him, and said :

'You have disgraced yourself, Mr. Smythe, and scandalized my home; without any provocation that I can perceive, you have insulted one of my most honoured guests. If you do not instantly apologise to him, I shall insist upon your immediate departure from this house.'

Charley laughed derisively.

'What!' he said, 'apologise to that "blackguard!"'

Mr. Cadmus' eyebrows contracted. The

ladies looked at each other, and shuddered.

‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘decide quickly.’

‘No, then! a million times NO!!’ said Charley, stepping so brusquely forward, that several ladies screamed and fled into the hall.

Whereupon Mr. Cadmus turned and called to the butler.

‘Briggs,’ said he, ‘show Mr. Smythe to his room, and assist him in packing his portmanteau; then send James with it to the Dolphin and Magpie, where Mr. Smythe will sleep to-night.’

Charley, dumbfounded at first, turned to Lottie, who immediately led the way, like an unconscious bellwether, from the dining-room, whence she was followed by all the ladies. Springing forward, he then intercepted Martha in her progress, and said:

‘Do you, too, turn against me, Marty?’

She answered him by averting her face, and showing him her back.

His was the old cry of *tu quoque*. It had been the death-cry of many a brave heart. Why should he be an exception? Sure enough! Away with him! If such cries were not sometimes heard, how could the earth’s scoundrels live?

So Charley, conscious only of his wrongs, and fairly heart-broken at last, went accompanied by Briggs to his chamber and packed his clothes in silence. When he had finished, he sat down a moment on the side of the bed, and buried his face in his hands.

This was more than Briggs—who had become sincerely attached to him—could stand.

‘Demmy, sir,’ he said, ‘this is a dem shame—that’s what *I* call it; and if you was married, and ’ad a ’ouse and wanted a butler, demmy, sir, I’d go off with you to-night—demmy, if I wouldn’t.’

This brightened Charley up a bit.

‘Give us your hand, Briggs,’ he said, ‘and good-bye, old man. Stop, though,’—taking a crisp five-pound note from his purse. ‘Here’s a little Christmas present for you, and the girls, too—of course I mustn’t forget them,’ and he once more fumbled in his pocket. ‘There you are, Briggs—a sovereign a-piece for *them*, and if you don’t drink my health, all of you, on Christmas-day——’

‘God bless you, sir! how could we help drinking to the kindest-’arted gentleman as ever lived?’ and Briggs actually wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

Nobody was in the hall as they descended the stairs. The drawing-room door was closed, but Charley heard a subdued buzz of conversation, and the strains of the 'Delta Kappa March,' as played by a pair of such dear—dear little hands.

When he reached the porch, a figure suddenly sprang out of the darkness and seized him by the hand. It was Dr. Colfax.

'Keep up your spirits, and take care of that cough,' said he; 'I know well enough where you got it, and I only wish I could prove it, that is all. Don't you be discouraged about the little girl—she will come round all right. Good-bye.' And before Charley could utter a word of thanks, he had squeezed his hand again and disappeared through the open door.

Charley passed a very miserable and restless night at the Dolphin and Magpie. His cough, too, proved to be very troublesome—and, ah, me! if his pillow was wet with tears, remember, reader, that he was very young and soft-hearted and foolish, and loved Marty dearly.

CHAPTER XII.

AS MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED BY THE
READER.

MR. THOMAS DEXTER had good reason for viewing with something like equanimity his baptism of Lafitte. The road to martyrdom is sometimes longer and more unsavoury. Clarence's butt of Malmsey would have been more effectual, but scarcely as satisfactory to Mr. Dexter himself; and though clerical linen may not have been entirely free from wine-stains in the good old days of Friar Tuck, it was a gratifying circumstance that the nineteenth century permitted no unholy tampering with the sacred neckcloth. Hence, Mr. Dexter knew that he had an initial advantage in this respect over Mr. Smythe, and this reflection compensated, in a measure, for an otherwise bitter consciousness that he was destitute of personal courage. Do not

attribute this to any extraordinary perspicacity upon the part of Mr. Dexter, for the dullest of us could have easily foretold the result of such a one-sided encounter.

It rarely happens, however, that the solemnity of a dinner-party is disturbed by an incident of so melodramatic a nature as the one we have described. Consequently, a number of torpid faculties were suddenly awakened in Mr. Cadmus' drawing-room that night, and pending Mr. Dexter's enforced absence, a vast amount of idle speculation got into active circulation within its four walls. The blonde young lady thought 'it was really disgraceful, I am sure;' and, appealing to Lottie, wished to know if the 'young man were her cousin, really?' and if so, 'how fortunate it was that he had not tomahawked poor Mr. Dexter outright; and what if he *should* chance to return and murder all the gentlemen for taking Mr. Dexter's part?'

Whereupon the lady in claret-coloured silk remarked that she would not be in the least surprised if he did, and thought that the servants should bar and bolt the front door at once.

This had the effect of eliciting from a

young gentleman of a decided atrabilarian aspect, with buck teeth, and a pendulous under lip, the very emphatic observation that 'he'd like to see the beggah try it on.'

At which, Lottie, in spite of her anger, felt constrained to answer :

'In view of your delicate constitution, Mr. Marasmus, I really trust he will *not* attempt to try it on.'

Then Sir John Pericardium, urgently appealed to as oracle in chief by the whole company, expressed it as his deliberate opinion that 'a civil war was detrimental to the—er—interests of any country or people ; leading to protective tariffs, a debased currency, and a reprehensible habit of carrying private fire-arms ;' which was felt to be very satisfactory indeed, and exactly to the point in question.

Just at this stage in the conversation, however, Mr. Dexter entered in company with Mr. Cadmus, and was straightway overwhelmed with expressions of condolence and sympathy, which were quickly merged into those of congratulation, when Mr. Cadmus, after publicly apologising to the reverend gentleman for the insult he had received beneath a hitherto hospitable roof, produced

a copy of the *Limeborough Herald*, and read, for the benefit of the ladies, the thrilling account of Mr. Dexter's exploit, of which mention has been already made in these pages. This, of course, brought Martha into prominent notice at once, and Mr. Marasmus, having fished much and often in the river Ooze, 'wondered, now, whether she saw any pike under the ice or not?' Martha was not quite certain whether she knew what a pike was like. She could tell a gudgeon at first sight, however, she thought.

Whereat Dr. Colfax, who had followed Mr. Dexter into the room, laughed outright, and then, quickly assuming a serious expression, remarked, in a general way, that it was strange Mr. Dexter had not caught a severe cold, such, for instance, as the one from which, as everybody must have observed, Mr. Smythe was suffering at dinner-time. Consequently, Mr. Dexter, feeling that some answer was expected from him, at once pressed his hand upon his chest and coughed violently. Then he expressed it as his opinion that it was nothing very serious, and a good deal more to the effect that he was very thankful, indeed, for such a narrow escape. Whereupon, the ladies exchanged

looks of commiseration over their coffee-cups, and once more wondered how Mr. Cadmus, who was such a perfect gentleman, could possibly have such a rude and uncultivated young man for a nephew.

When the time came for the company to disperse, it seemed but a natural thing, even to Lottie herself, that Mr. Dexter, in the absence of Charley, should be Martha's escort. So, in this wise, it befell that these two were thrown together upon a night which, of all nights in the year, was most likely to prove fatal to Charley's happiness.

Dexter was the first to speak as they dashed through the Limeborough streets with the yellow gaslight falling now and then upon their faces. Said he, with an abruptness suggesting the bursting of some pent-up and highly explosive emotion :

‘Are you still the friend of this man?’

‘Of Mr. Smythe, do you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Certainly not. There was no necessity, I think, to ask me the question,’ she answered warmly.

‘He insulted me, Martha.’

‘I know it.’

‘Insulted me grossly.’

‘He certainly did.’

‘And without cause.’

As Martha did not at once answer, he repeated:

‘Do you hear, Martha? without cause, I said.’

‘Yes,’ she answered; ‘and if it were you that saved my life, it was a very wicked thing for him to do. You *did* save my life, did you not, Mr. Dexter?’ and she raised her eyes to his in the full glare of a street lamp.

‘Martha!’ he said, reproachfully, ‘do I deserve this? Is it nothing to rescue a fellow creature from death? and do you value life so lightly that you disdain to accept it at *my* hands? Would you have been better pleased if this man had rendered you the service?’

‘No,’ she answered quickly; ‘and you must not think that I am ungrateful, for I am not; and I am sure that I—I—would not disdain anything at your hands; and as for Charley—for Mr. Smythe—I—I—feel sorry for him and pity him, that is all; and I only asked because I have known him a long time, and he always seemed to be so very honest, and naturally it is a little perplexing—and—and—you will excuse me for asking, won’t you?’

but I want to hear you say once more that there is no mistake in all this, and that it was truly you who saved my life. Don't be angry—don't be angry,' she quickly added, as he made a gesture of impatience.

'But you persist in doubting my word.'

'No, I don't—no, no; but answer me, answer me! *Was* it truly you?'

One single moment he hesitated. They were now out upon the open road. The night was dark, and they could no longer see each others' faces. To lie, under such circumstances, secure from the gaze of a pair of truth-searching eyes, was a comparatively easy task; so he spoke the monstrous words:

'It was truly I.'

'And Mr. Smythe has told a falsehood this evening?'

'He as truly has! Must I say more?'

'No, no,' she joyfully answered; 'I do, indeed, believe you; and you must never remember that I asked such a silly question. Hark! the clock is striking. It is Sunday morning; and oh, Mr. Dexter, you have not told me what the text of your sermon is to be! I wonder if Mr. Smythe will come to church?—if so,' she added thoughtfully, 'in your place, I should read that chapter about

Ananias and Sapphira ; it would touch up his conscience a bit, and be a good punishment for him. You must not be *too* revengeful, you know. But bear in mind the sermon upon Christian charity you preached last Sunday. Last Sunday !—it seems ages ago ! And oh ! Mr. Dexter,' she exclaimed, as though she had made the most astounding discovery in the world, '*I have only known you for a week !*'

In an instant his hand gravitated down to where hers lay snug and warm within her muff.

'It is true, Martha,' he said ; 'but that week has been the most eventful of my life, since it has made me acquainted with an adorable young lady, whom I now hold by the hand. When I was uttering those dreary platitudes upon Christian charity, I could not keep my eyes off your sweet face. I saw that you were a stranger and alone, and I resolved to put all conjecture upon the subject aside and deliberately follow you at the conclusion of the service.'

'Oh, for shame ! and what if some of your worthy parishioners had been the witnesses of this very unclerical proceeding ?'

'I would have simply snapped my fingers at them, that is all. I am lord of the manor

at Deadwick, and am privileged to do as I please. Moreover, what do *I* care what my parishioners think? They are, for the most part, a set of chawbacons, between whom and myself it is impossible that there could be anything in common. However, I am wandering from the point. We met without my having recourse to the expedient I have mentioned, and from that moment I have been a changed man. You spoke to me the other day about Miss Cadmus, and I then assured you that I had no matrimonial intentions in that quarter. You gave me a corresponding assurance as regards Mr. Smythe; and so the ground appeared to be clear for the advances of one who, learning at last the true definition of a charming woman, wished in his selfishness to win that charming woman for his own.'

Here Mr. Dexter paused, and glanced in the direction of his companion; without result, however, for her face was still hidden in the darkness; yet he could feel her hand tremble in his, and she made no reply.

'I endeavoured to tell you something of this the other day,' he went on, 'but was interrupted by Dr. Colfax. In the attempt to resume the subject yesterday, I made my-

self ridiculous, I am afraid ; and I owe you an apology for all the incoherencies I uttered upon that occasion.'

Martha immediately found her tongue again.

'You were coherent enough,' she said, 'in expressing your contempt for the calling you have chosen to follow.'

'I am glad to hear it ; for of a truth I have been for a year past the square peg in the round hole, and am sick of it. But you are mistaken in one thing : the profession was forced upon me ; and this brings me at once to a confession I feel in duty bound to make before proceeding further. Until within a very few days, I have been tormented with a suspicion that something in the nature of a stigma rested upon my birth. Do not start !' he added, as Martha made a movement of surprise ; 'happily for me, the most of my uncertainties upon this point are now removed, though I am, as yet, ignorant both of the name and the sex of my surviving parent, to whom I am indebted, it would appear, for my education and present incumbency. Yesterday morning, I received a letter from a London solicitor, announcing that I was the prospective heir to a fortune of thirty thousand pounds,

and would enjoy the immediate benefit of an annual income of five hundred pounds. I called yesterday upon that solicitor; and he not only confirmed these pleasant facts, but gave me most gratifying assurances as to my legitimacy and the probability of an early meeting with my surviving parent. Now, Martha, I have told you all. My prospects may not seem to you to be particularly brilliant; five hundred a year is not by any means an excessive income, but my living is worth as much more, and there are plenty of young curates who will be glad to fill my pulpit for eighty or ninety pounds a year, so that I shall be, after all, in receipt of a by no means despicable sum per annum.'

Here he paused; and Martha, feeling constrained to say something, remarked:

'I sincerely congratulate you, Mr. Dexter, and I must thank you, too, for confidences which, I take it, are not intended for the world at large.'

This was very prettily said, and with a considerable degree of firmness; but when the low thrilling voice again fell upon her ears, she thought in her "heart of heart" that she would not be able to stand this sort of thing very much longer.

‘Martha,’ he said, ‘you *know* why I have told you this. In many ways I have confessed my love for you;’ and drawing her gently to him, he whispered, ‘Martha, darling, now that I have taken you in my confidence, will you love me and be my wife?’

He could feel her tremble in his arms as he spoke; then, after a moment, she gently disengaged herself, and said :

‘Mr. Dexter!’

‘Please don’t freeze me in that way,’ he pleaded.

‘Tom, then! — Tom, dear! if that suits you better. It is almost wicked in you to startle one so. I am so inexperienced in these matters that I really don’t know what to say, though my obligation is so great that it would almost seem as if I were ungrateful in refusing you any honourable request, wouldn’t it, dear?’

‘Certainly, my darling.’

‘And what you ask is honourable and— and flattering, I know; but——’

She could hear the grinding of Dexter’s teeth.

‘But what!’ he exclaimed; ‘don’t say that you love this fellow after all! Don’t tell me

that you will permit him to triumph over me after what has happened to-night.'

'No, no, no! You don't understand. I should never marry Mr. Smythe. I *couldn't*. I pity him; yes, I *do* pity him, from the bottom of my heart, but I *couldn't* love him—no woman ever can love a coward! but I was not thinking of him at all, dear, but of a confession I must needs make to *you*.'

'Oh!' and Dexter became attentive at once.

'Yes, Tom,' and Martha lowered her voice to a whisper, 'there is a dreadful stain upon my name; my father did a very wicked thing. He left my poor mother, and ran away with another woman!'

'Is that all?' Dexter wondered.

'Ran away, too, with forty thousand pounds!'

'Whew! that is a serious affair.'

'No, no, Tom; it is not the loss of the money—I have plenty left; but it is the disgrace, the shame of the thing; and I could never consent to be an honest man's wife until I know whether my father is as guilty as I suspect him to be.'

'This is very absurd language,' said Dexter earnestly. 'What your father may have done

is nothing to me ; you are not responsible for his sins, darling.'

'I cannot help it ; you must wait. In a week, perhaps, I shall discover my father, and shall know all. I came to Europe for that purpose ; and I can decide upon nothing until the horrible doubt is either confirmed or removed from my mind.'

'What !—already !' cried Dexter, starting up in surprise, as the carriage at this moment pulled up in front of the cottage-door, and the coachman was heard descending from his seat. Then he turned to her again.

'You will not give me an answer, then ?'

'Not to-night ; please do not ask me.'

'You are cruel.'

'No, I am not.'

'And a coquette, I am afraid.'

'Oh, Tom ! that is very unkind.'

'How long, then, must my probation last ?'

She reflected a moment, and counted her fingers.

'Until next Saturday ; and remember that patience is almost as great a virtue as Christian charity.'

The coachman was now feeling his way toward the door-steps.

‘Will you be at church this morning?’ asked Dexter, ‘that at least will be something.’

‘I think not; I have an impression that Mr. Smythe will be there. You may hurl Ananias at his head, if you like, but I do not care about meeting him.’

‘That is quite right; I had forgotten.’ Then, putting his head down close by hers, he whispered, ‘Marty!’

‘Well, Tom!’

‘There is something you can scarcely deny me, under the circumstances. Quick! here comes the coachman.’

Martha bent down a moment, and in the darkness it would have been difficult to determine what actually took place. The coachman, too, made a great noise in opening the door, as if, from a long experience in the business, he knew just the requisite amount of notice he was expected to give young people who might possibly have an objection to abruptness in such matters.

It took Martha, after she had shaken hands in an amiable manner with Dexter in the presence of the coachman, several minutes

longer to find two half-crowns for the latter. Then, with Katty standing shading a candle with her hand in the doorway, the carriage scoured round in the narrow road, and was soon lost to view in the closing darkness.

‘There could have been no harm in it,’ she thought, mounting the stairs to her chamber; ‘what was the name of that duchess who kissed a butcher in exchange for a vote? and then, too, he will probably have a right before long to kiss me as often as he likes.’

Charley Smythe spent a very restless night at the Dolphin and Magpie, and was up betimes in the morning. He was nervous and feverish, and tried to effect an entrance into Mr. Taraxacum’s chemist shop next door in quest of ammoniated tincture of valerian, and failing in that, he bribed boots to bribe the barmaid with a half-crown to leave her bed and give him a brandy and soda. Then he walked up and down the coffee-room while boots was making the fire and unburdening numerous family secrets to him in the strictest confidence. Then he walked down the inn-yard, stopping at the kitchen-door to tell the cook just how he wanted his eggs done, and from there to the

desolate billiard-room, with its sickening odour of extinct cigar stumps, and finally into the stables, where Giles—who had been up to Epsom in the preceding May-time—gave him such a vivid description of the Derby-day and the doings of the famous Kaleidoscope, that he found himself inquiring the price of a ‘nobby turn-out for two persons there and back again from London ;’ for, surely, by that time, Marty and he would be friends again, he thought. In the midst of which came boots, with the message that breakfast was on the table. Whereupon Giles got a shilling for *his* trouble, and an impression began to get into active circulation around the Magpie and Dolphin that Charley was a millionaire and a ‘demmed nice gentleman.’

Breakfast disposed of, he took another b.-and-s., and had a confidential chat with the barmaid, who, it would appear, had a bed-ridden mother, and a brother in the Abyssinian war. Whereupon, it having transpired in the course of the conversation that the mother in her extremity was about to raffle off a few pieces of family plate, Charley bought a sovereign’s worth of tickets at a shilling each, and instructed the barmaid to

keep them until he should call for them. These directions he shortly countermanded, however. As he was going out of the door, he turned and said :

‘ I’ll tell you a better way ; you throw for me, and if you win, let your mother keep the *silver* until I call for it. Do you see ? now, don’t forget.’

And turning once more, he bent his steps in the direction of Deadwick.

‘ Martha, when she comes to sleep upon it, cannot refuse to see me and listen to my story,’ he said to himself, as he trudged over the frozen meadows. ‘ It was all my fault, after all. I *knew* that Dexter was a bad egg, and I shouldn’t have left him alone with Marty a minute. I should have said, “ Get up your *own* circulation, reverend sir, and trot after that brandy ; *I’ll* look after the lady.” That’s where *I* was a fool—as usual. I’m always unlucky. Such a hand, now, as I always get when I am playing whist ! One three-spot of trumps, a seven or a nine, and a knave of some other suit—*that’s* the sort of luck I have. And as for billiards ! I am always getting the wrong ball into the pocket, or some such darned foolishness as that. But Marty will be sure to listen to me ;

though she *is* hasty and sky-rockety, and all that sort of thing, she has sense enough to know that I would never lose my temper and waste expensive wine without good cause. Yes, by this time she has slept on it, and thought it all out. I wouldn't be surprised if she were sitting at the window now watching for me. A girl who has played marbles and hop-sotch with a fellow would certainly feel sorry for turning her back on him in a tiff. *I* should, if I were a girl. I don't know, though—it's impossible for a fellow to tell what he *would* do if he were a girl—girls are so perplexing, you'd have to be one a little while to find out—there's no other way. Oh! here's the cottage—and Marty—where is Marty? she is not at the window—but perhaps the poor girl is not up yet; it *is* a trifle early, after all—it must have been a very trying night for her. She will be glad to see me, though, I am sure. She will guess who it is when she hears my knock. I will rap twice, as I did the other day.'

Katty answered the summons at once, and informed Mr. Smythe that her mistress was not at home. Martha, to tell a sorrowful truth, being engaged at that moment in eating her breakfast in bed.

‘Where had she gone?’ Mr. Smythe, the picture of despair, displayed considerable eagerness upon that point.

Katty was very sorry (which, indeed, she was), but she didn’t know. She ‘spected,’ though, to London, as a ‘portant’ letter had come from there the evening before.

Whereupon there seemed nothing left for Charley to do but to give Katty a shilling, which she, at first, indignantly refused, and afterwards threw into the grate, in the presence of Martha, with the remark that :

‘Dat shillin’ burn my fingers. Marsr Smyth’s a gemlem—jes shuah he is—and yo’d bettah lef dat preacher man go ’bout his bizznitz. Dat’s de fus ting yo’d bettah do.’

Charley, very much disheartened, thought he would stop, on his way back, and have a chat with John Brophy.

But John and Mrs. Brophy were away from home, it would appear, and it came out, in the course of a rather severe cross-examination to which Charley subjected the servant, that Mr. Brophy had gone away, as near as it could be made out in the kitchen, on account of some trouble with the parson, whom the master had sworn was not fit to enter an

honest man's door, let alone to preach the gospel to his betters.

With this piece of intelligence Mr. Smythe was, of course, highly elated.

‘Thundering good fellow, that Brophy! one of the best fellows I ever knew!’ said he, on the homeward tramp. ‘I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he knocked Dexter down the very next time he met him; and—Lord! couldn’t he just do it!—he’d knock all the theology out of him in less than five seconds—that’s all there is in him to be knocked out—it isn’t religion, I’ll swear!’ and Charley laughed aloud at the pleasant reflection. ‘I suppose Marty has been obliged to go to town on business,’ was his final conclusion upon this subject; ‘has good news of some kind, I suspect, and as there is no use of my loafing about here now,’ and he sighed, ‘I might as well go up to London too, and see if I can be of any use. Old Palmer can tell me where to find her, and then I must see Mivvert too. Oh! by all means, I shall go; and I suppose I had better write a note to Lottie, and an apology to uncle. Hang it! it *was* too bad; the table-cloth all stained, and the carpet too, and pieces of glass, perhaps, sticking into Lottie’s feet. If I had only taken time to

think, and hadn't been in such a devil of a hurry, I might have got Dexter out on the lawn—if the dining-room curtains had been pushed back it would have given us plenty of light—and there we could have had it out in good English style. Uncle wouldn't have cared then, and I bet Dexter would be wearing linseed poultices all over him to-day, for I *know* I should have licked him. Yes, I shall write to uncle and apologise for not doing the thing in the right way.'

And he did. Then he hurried to the station. He arrived at King's Cross at three P.M. in the midst of a pelting rain, and, hiring a cab, insisted upon being driven around Bayswater for two mortal hours upon the bare chance of seeing Marty's face at one of the ten thousand windows of that populous quarter.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RENDEZVOUS AT THE GATE.

MARTHA, enveloped from head to foot in a grey waterproof, and her face concealed by a black veil, descends this Monday evening from a hansom at the foot of Highgate Hill, with the intention of walking the remaining distance to Oak Lodge.

The reflection that she may be bound upon a fool's errand in no wise deters her from the purpose of keeping tryst with the problematical 'Tilda. George may prove to have been an arrant impostor, an ingenious scamp, who will be equal to the task of producing a plausible, but wholly apocryphal 'Tilda. Martha's mind is full of surmises to this effect; but has it not been already mentioned in these pages that our heroine is endued with an inordinate amount of self-conceit?

She would like to see the woman who could humbug her. She has been to her bankers' this afternoon, and she has certain crisp bank-notes in her pocket of which she intends making judicious use.

'I have not *les yeux aux talons*,' she says, as she toils slowly up the hill. 'No, no; if 'Tilda really exist, and possesses any vendible secrets, I shall have them out of her at any cost, for I am not the sort of girl to be duped by a woman.'

It has ceased to rain, and a wild high wind is abroad, which snarls in her ears, and beats her back, and lifts her veil beneath the flaring gas-lamps for the inspection of passers-by, one of whom, a man with a heavy beard, stops and looks after her a moment, as if he had a notion to follow. Martha, reflecting that if he should do so, and prove to be a pertinacious pursuer—it would be embarrassing in more ways than one—is greatly relieved when he reconsiders his intention and passes on. It is never at any time a crowded thoroughfare. The Duke of St. Alban's bus discharging its contingent of passengers at the foot of the hill, a covey of young gentlemen come up and pass her, and gradually disperse into the villas lining the road; then she is alone, which

she feels to be a great relief, though it is a wild sort of night, and she is conscious that her heart is beating violently with excitement. Once, on turning, she sees a coppery glare in the atmosphere below her, as of the smouldering of a mighty conflagration, and which she knows is the gleam of a million street-lamps blurred in rising sea-fog. Then, hurrying on, she finds herself encompassed by high walls and massive lodge-gates, with trees gesticulating fiercely beyond, and the hurly-burly of wind dinning incessantly in her ears.

Now a red light streams across the way from the Crown and Vulture, and in another moment, the clock of the Highgate church hammers out eight strokes just as she turns into the lane which leads to her destination. At last she stands panting before the gate, and pushing gently against it, finds that it is fastened. Her suspense, however, is of but short duration. Above the rushes of wind she hears a crunching of gravel in the garden, quickly followed by the creak of a bolt, and as she crouches out of sight for fear of meeting Mrs. Warren, she perceives a head thrust cautiously through the open door, and then a short thick-set woman standing in the lane, who, shading her eyes with her hand, is

anxiously peering into the darkness about her.

‘Whoever it may be, it is *not* Mrs. Warren, says Martha to herself. So she boldly steps up to the woman, and asks :

‘Are you, ’Tilda Birch?’

‘Yes, ’m,’ in a quavering voice.

‘And you are George’s sweetheart, I suppose. Did *he* tell you to be here at the gate?’

‘Yes, ’m, he wrote and told me a lady wanted to see me particular at eight o’clock to-night, and I suppose *you* are the lady, mim?’

‘I wonder if this can be a snare,’ thinks Martha; adding aloud, with a view of determining the question, ‘Yes, ’Tilda, I am the lady. Shall I come into the garden?’

‘Tilda is reflective a moment, then she says, in a deliberate manner:

‘I suppose so, mim; though, if ’t happens to be the same to you, I should prefer to talk somewhere else. You see, I asked permission to go down to the linendraper’s, and if the missis chanced to see me walking about the garden with you, ’mim, I might get into trouble, you see—’ ’Tilda’s voice by this time having sunk to a mere whisper.

To which Martha, greatly re-assured, replies :

‘Is it at all likely that she *will* see us?’

‘Tilda glances over her shoulder in the direction of the house, then up at the starless sky.

‘I suppose not, mim,’ she says, in a whisper ; adding, as she gently pushes Martha through the gate and closes it behind her : ‘Follow me, mim, here on the grass, for the gravel is too noisy ; and, feeling her way cautiously round a clump of bushes and through an empty flower-bed, brings Martha up to the door of the old summer-house seen by her on a former occasion, as we know, through the keyhole of the gate.

Martha finds it to be the reverse of a cheerful place for an interview, being as dark as a cavern, pervaded with an odour of damp earth and rotten wood, and suggestive generally of bats and fungi ; while a mad laburnum tree is thrashing the roof, and the wind snarls savagely through a broken lattice. ‘Tilda, stumbling over a heap of brush, finds a seat, wipes it with her handkerchief, and then guides Martha thither.

‘It ain’t a very tidy place,’ she explains, ‘but under the circumstances, mim, it’s the

best I can do;' which remark is of such a conventional nature, that Martha checks herself in the act of saying, 'Why, it's good enough, I'm sure,' and substitutes a genteel shiver as she lifts her skirts and occupies the slightest possible amount of space upon the proffered seat.

'And now, 'Tilda,' she begins, 'did George tell you why I wished to see you?'

'Well, mim,' says 'Tilda, in a whisper, 'I sort of—of inferred from George's letter that you wanted to find out something about master.'

'I do,' says Martha, quickly; 'and I told George that you should be paid for your information.'

'Yes,' assents 'Tilda, 'he told me so.'

'And you, I suppose,' pursues Martha, 'would be very glad to leave your place here, get married to George, and settle down in that little cottage at Isleworth.'

'Tilda's laugh and 'Oh, mim!' is so conclusive upon this point, that Martha immediately asks:

'How much do you still require for the purchase of the nursery?'

'Oh, a very large sum,' 'Tilda says with a sigh.

‘Well, how much?’

‘Twenty pounds, mim.’

‘That *is* a large sum!’ says Martha, affecting a tone of surprise. ‘Are you sure it is so much?’

‘Oh, yes, mim!’ ‘Tilda *is* very sure of that, and sighs from the very centre of her diaphragm. As Martha, however, does not for several moments vouchsafe any reply, she becomes alarmed at the threatened hiatus in a conversation of consuming interest to her, and at length remarks:

‘It’s a good deal, mim, I know; and of course we couldn’t expect to raise such a sum all at once—it isn’t likely, mim; but, you see, you asked the question, and of course, I was obligated to answer you fair and honest, mim.’

‘Yes, ‘Tilda, I understand,’ says Martha, with the air of a woman who has reflected deeply and at last made up her mind.

‘It is a large sum, as I said before, but I will not tell you what I am willing to do until I hear your answer to a few questions which I am now going to put to you.’

‘Yes, ‘m.’

‘Well, ‘Tilda, suppose you had had a mother, who was good and beautiful, and a

father who was rich, handsome, and kind, whom you loved dearly—dearly; and one day a strange woman had come into your beautiful and happy home, and had stolen him away from you and from your mother—and that mother had then died of a broken heart! what would you have thought of that guilty woman?’

‘Tilda’s feelings, it would appear, are capable of easy ebullition, for she retorts at once and with great vehemence :

‘I should have thought that she was not fit to live; that’s what *I* would have thought, mim.’

‘Very well!’ pursues Martha, with great composure; ‘suppose further that, after the death of your mother, you crossed the seas and hunted in many lands for that guilty woman and that wretched father, to punish the one and reclaim the other?’

‘Tilda’s eyes are now visibly aflame in the darkness.

‘Well, mim! ——’ she exclaims excitedly.

‘Well,’ pursues Martha, warming over the theme, ‘suppose that, at last, you had traced them both to London, to a house, say at Highgate, a house surrounded like this, with

high walls—a house in which certain windows were barred with iron bars——’

‘Look!—like them, up there—where the light is?’

‘Tilda has risen, and fairly dragged Martha to the lattice—is pointing at a row of upper windows, against the white blinds of which, illuminated from within, are sharply projected certain perpendicular lines, the import and purpose of which it is impossible to mistake.

‘Yes,’ says Martha, ‘like those. Let us even suppose, for instance, that you had traced him to that very room, and that you had found your way into this summer-house, and were in search of some means to enter that barred and bolted chamber; suppose then that I, or some one else, who chanced to be in service in this house, and who was only prevented from quitting such service by the necessity of obtaining twenty pounds to set up a sweetheart and husband-soon-to-be in business, and you were then to come to me and say, “Open the door to me in your mistress’s absence, show me the way to that bolted chamber, put the key of it, if there is a key to it, into my hand, and this twenty pounds, so essential to your happiness and the chance of your release from servitude,

will be yours"—what, 'Tilda, do you think I would say ?'

'Tilda, weak from excitement, can only sink down upon the seat and gasp.

'You'd say, "Yes, mim," of course.'

'I should, without the slightest hesitation ; wouldn't *you* ?'

'One word, mim, before I answer. May I be so bold as to ask if your name is Summerfield ?'

Martha is so clearly unprepared for this, that, for a moment, she can only stare at her interlocutor in the darkness.

'Yes—why ?' she says at last.

'Because, mim, it's the name as he is always shouting out ; and I am surer now of what is my duty in this here matter.'

'Well then, 'Tilda,' says Martha earnestly, 'I shall rely upon you, and trust in your fidelity. I have already detained you beyond your time, I am afraid. If you will show me to the gate, and walk as far as the nearest street-lamp, I will write you down my address. Whenever you learn that your mistress is to be absent, drop me a line—no, send me a telegram, as quickly as possible ; and if you do what I then require of you, you shall have the twenty pounds. Indeed, the moment you lead

me to the door of that chamber, and place the key of it in my hand, I shall place four five-pound notes into *yours* ; now, let us go. —But what is that ?

The slamming of the hall-door, beyond a doubt ; the sound of some one groping their way down the steps ; the scouring of heavy feet upon the gravel-walk.

‘ Ssh ! ’ says ‘ Tilda, ‘ it’s the butler, and he is coming here I am sure ; he’s going upon some errand, and perhaps the missis is going out this evening. Joey always fetches a carriage for her, you see, and I know that he keeps a lantern hid in here somewhere.’

‘ But what are we to do, then ? ’ demands Martha, in some alarm.

‘ Ssh ! I’ll frighten him and upset his lantern ; then you slip out and wait behind the summer-house until he goes. You will overhear all he says—ssh ! ’

And, crouching in a corner, they hear the footsteps, now just outside the door, a low muttering sound, very much approaching to a human growl ; then a violent dashing of pebbles against the summer-house, a great snapping of twigs, the sound as of somebody falling through a skylight, and a howl of a most irreverent nature. At the same instant

both Martha and 'Tilda hear a window-sash raised, and a woman's voice demand :

'What's the matter, Joey ?'

'Oh nothing, marm!' answers the butler, 'only I wish I 'ad that George 'ere; that's all I wish. I've just sot down in one of them blessed cow-cumber-frames o' his'n, that's wot *I've* done; I've just sot down in it;' and repeating something to himself, which sounded to Martha very much like 'lamb,' he gets upon his feet again amid a great jingle of broken glass, and feels his way to the summer-house. Now that he is so near, Martha discovers that he is saying something much worse than 'lamb.' She however, taking advantage of the fracas, has slipped out and secured herself against the chance of discovery. 'Tilda remains within, nearly stifled with laughter.

'I'd slice him, as I would one of his own cowcubbers, if I 'ad 'im 'ere. A settin' man-traps like that! I never heard of sich a thing in all my born days—as if the missis couldn't eat her salmon without *them* un-wholesome things. If I 'aven't cut my juggler wain, then it isn't that 'ere George's fault, that's all. Now, where can that blessed lantern a got to? Catch me a sittin' down in any *more* o' George's cowcumber-frames,

that's all—just catch me ! And didn't he say as he'd dug a well in the garden for me, and kivered it up so nice that I'd quite enjoy the excitement of fallin' to the bottom ; an' that he 'oped as I would fall in the summer-time, so as to take a lavender-bush an' a few sweet things o' that sort along with me—whatever he might a meant by sich nonsense as that, Lamb it. 'Ere, where's that lantern a got to. You *must* find that 'ere lantern, Joey. If the missis will take it in her precious 'ead to go to the Langham Hotel sich a night as this, it's 'er look out—ain't it ?

At this point 'Tilda sneezes almost at his very elbow.

'O Lord ! Look 'ere, none o' that, now !' says Joey, bolting out of the door like a shot, and across a flower-bed, while a sudden gust of wind swoops down upon him and whirls his hat in the direction of the gate.

Once more the window is raised, and Joey, securing his hat as by a miracle, is constrained for once to dispense with the services of his lantern, and departs upon his errand.

Then, quietly emerging from the summer-house, 'Tilda approaches Martha and says, in a whisper :

'I must go now, mim, but if you choose

to wait until the missis is gone, I'll contrive to send Joey away, and will let you into the house to-night.'

Martha, assenting warmly to the proposition, re-enters the old summer-house while 'Tilda carefully picks her way back through the shrubbery to the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE QUEST ENDED.

MARTHA finds this protracted waiting in the dark to be by no means exhilarating business. She tries, with indifferent success, to imagine herself a Peri waiting at the gates of Paradise—there being something inconsistent with the idea of Paradise in these iron-barred windows, which possess for her so terrible a fascination, that for a long time she cannot keep her eyes away from them. She is rewarded, too, at last, by seeing a human figure projected, with the clearness and precision of a silhouette, against one of the window-blinds. Remaining stationary an instant, it recedes from view ; reappears, with less distinctness, and then commences, a series of dissolving views, or shadow dances upon all the blinds at once, which is very suggestive of teetotums and spinning dervishes.

But the light is suddenly dimmed—the shadows disappear, and the windows themselves cease to be more than barely visible.

She now becomes conscious that her hair is clotted with moisture, and that the raw and rasping air has penetrated to her very skin. A dismal enough business, thus far, truly! she thinks, feeling her way to the door of the summer-house. Dead leaves and fragments of paper are trotting excitedly about the lawn at the bidding of the peremptory east wind, while all the bushes in the garden raise their skinny arms to heaven, and mutely protest against their inability to scamper away with their lively neighbours. But, surely, it is growing lighter. The dusky redness of the lower atmosphere has proved contagious, has mounted and infected the very zenith. Nebulous shapes of shrub and tree start out of the darkness. Martha, tracing out an elaborate pattern of Spanish lace in the sky, discovers the agency of a great myriad-twigg'd elm in the matter. Then, as she becomes conscious of the presence of a row of gnome-like vegetable creatures, bent and twisted into the form of an espalier against the outer wall, she chances to look up, and finds that the unwonted light pours from a great chasm in the

east. The sky, indeed, is moving like a scroll westward, and reveals, at last, poised upon its edges, a young and feeble moon, which gives forth one solitary trickle of molten amber, and straightway dips out of sight. Meanwhile, the whole of the Orient has broken into an eruption of bleared and yellow stars.

Martha is fairly shivering at last.

‘Surely,’ she thinks, ‘Joey’s path must be beset with cucumber frames, or else he has lost his way.’

Again the punctual bell of the Highgate church hammers out the hour. A dog barks, possibly in recognition of a whilom rival and present friend, to whom he is indebted for relieving the tedium of the wretched small hours. And now comes—Martha, fairly forced to smile at last, wonders if ‘Tilda, too, is listening—comes the tinkle of the ‘conspirator’s chorus’ upon a barrel-organ in the distance.

At this point, however, the gate opens, and a man, concealed one instant from view behind a rhododendron thicket, shuffles across the lawn in the direction of the house. A ray of light shoots through the garden, and as quickly retires again—a door slams, then all is still as before.

‘That must be the butler. Surely, now, I shall not have to wait much longer,’ thinks Martha.

It does seem, though, to be an unconscionably long time; intermittent appeals to her watch revealing the astounding fact that there are now several hundred seconds to the minute. Between her watch and her heart, too, there is now a lively competition as to which shall tick the loudest—the odds, Martha thinks, being in favour of the latter. There had been something premature, too, it would seem, in the appearance of the stars, for the fog-curtain has been promptly rung down again, and the earth, rimmed as with a Gyge’s ring, blackens into a total eclipse. The wind dies out with a sudden gush, as from a pricked bellows; the trees sway a moment longer, then, regaining their equilibrium, are at rest. A few yellow tongues of flame are still to be seen in the air, like sparks in a vertigo, though contours of roofs and gables are no longer visible; but these too are shortly blurred in advancing mist, and Martha is fairly walled in by darkness at last.

The suspense seems interminable to her. Her pulse is beating madly, and every nerve in her body is in full rebellion to her will. She feels that she will shortly commit some

indiscretion, if this strain upon her faculties and power of mental endurance is not speedily removed.

Coincident with this reflection, however, comes the sound of approaching wheels. A vehicle is clearly ascending the lane. She hears the voice of the driver, the tread of horse's hoofs. Then an instant's cessation of all sound, followed by the loud clangour of a bell in the garden.

Speeds past her now a feeble glimmer of light from an open door, and faintly adumbrated in the closing mist, two figures bearing down upon the summer-house; whereat her heart stands still with a terror she cannot explain. A voice almost at her side says :

'This way, marm. I've got a lantern in 'ere, an' matches in my pocket, an' it won't take me a minute, marm. 'Eaven knows how many of them 'ere man-traps George left behind him, for he was vindictive enough, he was, to honeycomb the whole garden, marm. That's my opinion of *'im*.'

'Well, well, Joey, hurry, then,' answers a feminine voice through the lattice beside which Martha is standing.

Joey, emboldened by the lady's presence, immediately enters the summer-house, and

proceeds to fumble about for his lantern. Suddenly touching Martha's hand, which is icy cold, in the darkness, he exclaims :

'God Almighty !' and rushes out of the door like an affrighted Tam O'Shanter, with his hair on end, and a number of square feet of goose-flesh about his person.

Fortunately, now, for Martha, another murky stream of light filters its way through the mist, apparently from the garden gate, for a creaking of hinges is heard and a voice demands :

'Can the lady see her way ?'

Joey, palpitating in the centre of the lawn, feels his courage to be sufficiently reinforced to answer :

'Jist throw your light over them bushes by the gate, and the missis can see 'er way then. Here ! that's right ! now, marm, follow me, marm ! I'm sorry about that lantern o' mine's gettin' mislaid so, unless that 'ere George has took it ; look out, marm, for the puddle ! but I oughn't to have put it in that 'ere summer-house at all—a rotten old tumble-down thing, a full of wermin and bats and snails. Look out, marm ! I *say*, there ! carn't you hold that 'ere lantern straighter ? What *are* you a doin' of ?'

Martha hears Joey holding forth in this strain for several minutes; then comes the shutting of a carriage door and a mingled clatter of wheels and iron hoofs, succeeded by the banging of a gate, when follows the spectacle of Joey making such extraordinary time past the summer-house, that Martha, in spite of the absorbing interest of the situation, is constrained to laugh outright. And now the door closes upon the form of the gallant butler, and she is once more alone in darkness. She is sensible, too, of the increasing cold, and somewhat familiar, by this time, with the topography of the garden, ventures, under cover of the fog, upon patrolling the lawn. She is interrupted at last by the sound of approaching voices. Both are easily recognisable. Says 'Tilda, in a loud tone:

'A ghost in the summerhouse! What next, Mr. Joey?'

'Well, I didn't exactly *see* it, you know; but I touched him. Tell me, ain't ghostses always cold?'

'Yes.'

'And m'ist and clammy?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then, there is no use in your going on that way. I *touched* him, I say.'

‘Well, *I’m* not afraid. Here, give me those matches ; I’ll find your lantern for you in a jiffy.’

By this time they have reached the door of the summerhouse. Martha, in a secure position behind a thicket, can just distinguish this much.

There follows a crackle and a gleam of yellow fire, which reveals Joey’s face—vast, rotund, and a stooping female figure beside it.

‘Now, Joey, where’s your ghost ?’ says ‘Tilda, with a laugh. ‘Give me another match.’

‘Well, you needn’t larf. I know what I felt ; an’ it was m’ist an’ clammy ; that’s what it was !’

Another crackle of fire, and ‘Tilda exclaims :

‘There’s your lantern on the bench in the corner. Now look sharp, and I’ll walk as far as the gate with you.’

There is a rattle of glass and the flashing of more matches ; then, as the summerhouse bursts into a feeble illumination, Martha sees the two walk in the direction of the gate, the lantern melting away in the fog to a mere point of saffron-coloured flame.

A moment later, 'Tilda returns, and whispers :

'Are you here, mim?'

'Yes,' says Martha, stepping from behind the shrubbery.

'You must be very cold and tired a waiting, mim; but it's all right now. The missis has gone to the Langham Hotel to visit some friends, I believe; and I've sent Joey off upon an errand, which will take him very near the public-houses, and keep him away for an hour at least. Come, mim, follow me.'

'Am I to go to the room at once?' asks Martha, in some trepidation at the imminence of the step before her. 'I saw a bright light in the windows and shadows moving behind it, but all that ceased some time ago.'

'Oh yes'm,' rejoins 'Tilda; 'the missis went up to see him before she left; he's very quiet, I believe, to-night. Ssh! the kitchen is right here in this wing, and the cook she have very sharp ears.'

'Stop one moment,' whispers Martha, at the foot of the steps; 'he is not—not a-bed, is he?'

'Oh dear, no! I've just been up to peep, mim, through the keyhole. He's as quiet as a lamb, and is at work on his wings, I think.'

‘His wings!’

‘Yes’m ; he’s got a notion of flying, I’ve heard the missis say.’

‘Is he *really* crazy, ’Tilda, do you think?’

‘Well, it does look very much like it, don’t it? but of course you’ll be much better able to judge about that than me. But, mim, one minute, if you please ; the door is ajar and the gas is turned down low in the hall, and everything is all ready ; but, mim, you see you’re a stranger to me, and I’m running a great risk for George’s sake ; and you wouldn’t get me into no trouble, would you, mim?’

Martha gives her a solemn assurance that, come what may, she will not betray her agency in the matter, and concludes by slipping four five-pound notes into her hand.

‘Well, mim,’ continues ’Tilda, ‘you go up the stairs then, and wait upon the landing until I turn up the hall-gas again, and until you hear me go out into the kitchen. Then you look at your watch, and wait five minutes longer ; so if anything does happen, it can’t be put on me, as I’ll be talking to the cook at the time. Will you do that, mim?’

Again Martha assents.

‘Thank you very much, mim ; and now the door you want to find is the first on the

left, and you'll see the key hanging on a nail beside it. Ssh!' and opening the door softly, to see that the coast is clear, she motions to Martha to enter, and quietly ascend the stairs in the rear of the hall. Then she slams the door loudly, turns up the gas, and railing at 'that Joey' at the top of her voice, bends her steps in the direction of the kitchen, whence, a minute later, comes the sound of obstreperous laughter.

Alone, upon the upper landing, a strange terror seizes upon Martha. She hears, almost at her very side, a curious whirring noise and the low muttering of a man's voice. Spell-bound, she for an instant is afraid to stir. The sound of her own breathing alarms her; a board cracks beneath her feet, and it seems to her that the whole neighbourhood must have heard it; her boot creaks, and her heart at once stands still. Nevertheless, she approaches the mysterious door, and, stooping, places her eye at the keyhole. Audible enough now is the whirring noise and the man's muttering—but human being she cannot discern through the aperture. Now she searches for the key to this Blue Beard's chamber, and removes it from its nail.

'Two minutes more,' she thinks, 'and it

will be all over. Courage now, Marty! there should be no faltering at the hour of triumph; your heart should beat rather with gladness than with terror. Another moment, and your long quest will be finished! Truly you have been a good and faithful child. To bring about this blessed consummation, you have striven hard these many weary months. He cannot fail to be proud of his daughter. At your cry of "Father!" he will open his poor old arms and press you to his mayhap aching heart; and there, upon his bosom, the woman who has wrought all this misery will find you upon her return. Once more, then, courage! and, under the stimulus of these reflections, Martha inserts the key into the lock and opens the door. A man is standing with his back towards her: with one wild cry she leaps forward.

'Father!'

He faces suddenly round; and her next words freeze upon her lips; a sudden numbness seizes her limbs, and she totters back against the wall with a gasp.

It is not her father. Never, to her knowledge, has she seen this man before.

CHAPTER XV.

VÆ VICTIS!

IT is a tall, gaunt man with flaming black eyes, who immediately springs, with a laugh, to the open door, withdraws the key, and places it in his pocket; then, bowing with ceremonious courtesy to the affrighted Martha, he says :

‘Punctual to the minute, your ladyship; but I am ready. Our wings are in excellent condition; we have but to mount to the roof, and if the stars, or St. Giles’s bell-tower, don’t get in our way, we shall be on the top of St. Paul’s by cock-crow. And his grace the duke—does he sleep well in these days? He should, for he has the loftiest tester above his bed, at St. Paul’s, of any man in Europe. But I won’t detain you longer; we can talk as we fly. This is a serviceable wing, but it will not shed water, I am afraid. Does it rain, this evening?’

He stops in the act of adjusting a pinion of wire and brown paper to his shoulder, as he asks this question.

‘Because if it does,’ he adds, ‘we had better wear our waterproofs.’

Martha, faltering that she thinks it too foggy for an aerial expedition to-night, moves slowly toward the door. But he intercepts her on the way thither, and presses a pair of wings upon her acceptance.

‘Try them,’ he says, with great earnestness. ‘I made them myself—they are lark’s wings. If you prefer it, we might go up and see the sun rise. Does your ladyship sing? the lark’s song is not at all difficult.’

‘The fog, sir, the fog; you must not leave the room!’ pleads Martha, in dismay. ‘What have I done? what have I done?’ she thinks to herself. ‘If I had but listened to Mr. Palmer! If I can only summon help and keep him here until it arrives.’

She looks around the room in search of a bell-rope, and discovers it hanging beside him. His eyes following hers perceives the action.

‘No, no,’ he whispers, ‘we need no help, and besides, she would object, she always does; she has a prejudice against flying. She

would put all the birds of the air into cages, as she has me ; I argue with her for hours, but it's all time wasted. It would do her good to take a flight to Westminster Abbey and back again before breakfast every morning ; and I tell her so, but she won't,' he sorrowfully adds, ' she won't.'

' Who are you talking about, sir ?'

He listens attentively at the door a moment before he answers, then approaching her, he bends down and whispers :

' My sister Carrie, your ladyship.'

She does not wish him to see that she shrinks from him, and she is determined to ask him one more question. Steadying her eyes as well as she can, therefore, she looks into his and says :

' You mean Mrs. Warren, I suppose ?'

' Hush ! yes,' he answers, ' she is known by that name. She will not bear the other ;' and his brow darkens.

The cold perspiration is now breaking from Martha's face.

' What other ?' she gasps.

Instantly his hands are clenched, his features grow tense and hard, and his breath comes and goes quickly between set teeth.

' What other ?' he repeats, coming so close

that Martha retreats in terror to the opposite wall, 'why, the man's who robbed me of my sister, and struck me down at her feet, and brought upon me this accursed——'

Here he pauses, and drawing his hand across his forehead in a bewildered way, seems to struggle for a time with some painful memory. At last he bursts into a thin cackle of laughter, and says :

'Now I remember—you said there was a fog, and that you could not find your way. You should wear fog spectacles, like us owls ; but it may be only knee-deep, after all—there is but little constitution to most fogs, and the upper atmosphere is trying to them. You shall wait, however, until I take a turn or two around the garden and over Highgate, if you will kindly help me on with this left wing and will hold up the hall window for me until I start. I must apologise to your ladyship for not being able to use the windows in this room for our flight, my sister having carried her prejudice against aerostatics to the ridiculous extreme of barring every one of them. However, the hall window has a broad ledge, and is admirably adapted to our purpose. Permit me to offer your ladyship my arm ;' and the gaunt figure, advancing to

Martha, bows with the grave and ponderous courtesy of a knight of La Mancha.

She feels that she is beset by an imminent and deadly peril. She must needs steady her faltering tongue and steel her jangling nerves. Into her conscience has burned like hot metal the conviction that she has placed in needless jeopardy a human life—a life which, without the bending of every nimble faculty to the task, the hardening of every untried muscle for a deadly encounter, it may be, she will be powerless to save. She has no longer any room in her heart for mere animal terror; all her mental processes are brought to bear upon a problem of life and death. She knows that in another moment the man before her will lie a bleeding and broken mass upon the garden-walk—unless by some device of hers she can divert him from his purpose—a victim to her headlong self-sufficiency and rashness. To escape from the room would be to precipitate the catastrophe, and, indeed, to become accessory to a crime. It would not be a whit baser to abandon a drowning man whom by misadventure one has jostled into the flood, she thinks, luminously, amid all the blinding, rushing tumult of emotions with which for an instant she has been overwhelmed. She

must stay with this madman now, must rely upon her powers of cajolery, and affect to humour his vagaries, until by some lucky chance she may be enabled to summon aid from the kitchen. If she fails, then against the lunatic's strength of thew and muscle she must contend, until her shrieks are answered.

Accordingly she bows to him in return, and says, with a ghastly smile,

'I think I—I *will* go with you if you can find a stronger pair of wings. I'm afraid I am a trifle heavy for a lark.'

He looks her over critically a moment, and answers, in a tone of conviction :

'Yes, but curlew's wings won't do at all.'

'Well, then, try some other kind.'

A look of annoyance creeps over his face, which Martha does not fail to note.

'Lark's wings always *have* answered, though,' he says, 'and St Giles' steeple is not half so troublesome with them on, but,' he adds, suddenly brightening up, 'perhaps your ladyship wears stays?'

Martha edging off toward the door, admits, with a flash of colour in her frightened face, that such is her habit.

'Ah, well, no wonder you objected to the wings. Take them off at once, my dear lady.'

I'm sorry,' he adds, relapsing into his former air of gallantry, 'exceedingly sorry that the absurd barriers which the world interposes between us and your charming sex will render it impossible for me to extend any offer of assistance. I will, however, retire into the wardrobe.'

'Oh, yes, sir, please do, and wait until I call you,' says Martha, with such palpable eagerness, that he blinks at her a moment without any reply. Then, he says, with a significance which does not escape her :

'I forgot. The wardrobe is superfluously encumbered with a lock. It is a fundamental article of my faith, your ladyship, that all locks, bars and bolts are superfluities. Decorum, madame, points inexorably to the hall—permit me to open the door to you. There is a maid-servant in this house who has ears like a beagle's. I would, therefore, enjoin the silence of a growing-leaf, or else we shall not reach St. Paul's dome to-night. Give three discreet taps upon the door when you are ready.'

In this wise Martha finds herself alone upon the landing, and undecided whether to descend the stairs quickly and summon the servants, or attempt some hasty method of

barricading the door. While she is yet debating the point, her eye falls upon a wooden bar which lies close against the skirt-board, the use of which she at once divines, as she remembers that the door opens outwards. To feel for the iron hasp in the jamb, and lift the bar in its place, is the work of an instant. One side is already adjusted, and the other is on the point of slipping into position, when the door is suddenly pushed open, and Martha is dragged fairly off her feet and thrown into the centre of the room.

‘ Treachery is it, my lady ? ’ cries the madman, as he stands over her with blood-shot eyes. ‘ You are in league with the rest of them, are you, to keep me caged up like an eagle in the Zoo ? Oh, oh ! These are the tricks of the aristocracy, are they ? The stones of St. Stephen’s are only for such ring-doves as *you* to peck at, eh ? you, all of you, think I can’t fly higher than a tame gobbler. You shall see. I shall sit astride the ball of St. Paul’s until the *Times* goes to press, and *you’ll* see what *they* say about it. Now, I’m going, and don’t you stir ! ’

As he moves toward the door, he keeps his eyes, still red with passion, steadily upon her. Clearly intent upon leaping from the

window he is at this moment, and Martha, stunned and bruised as she is by her fall, is equally determined to frustrate that attempt, even if it shall be at the cost of her life.

At the threshold, he turns his head an instant toward the stairs. Quick, then, as a leaping flame, Martha springs at the bell-rope, and the cunning madman laughs, as he hears the severed cord drop from her hands to the floor. Now, with a curse, he endeavours to seize her again, but she eludes his grasp and flies shrieking for help into the hall, and bars the way to the window. Once more she is hurled, a mass of torn and tumbled drapery, upon the floor. Again she is back, and holds him, with torn and bleeding fingers, while her shrieks mingle with the crash of broken glass.

Other hands have seized upon him now. 'Tilda, the cook, and the kitchen-maid, by an almost superhuman effort, have dragged him from the window and have barred his further egress. Suddenly, then, he turns and darts down the stairs, whence he comes slinking back, closely followed by a tall lady in black, whom Martha instantly recognises as Mrs. Warren.

'What does this mean?' she demands, in

a peremptory tone, as she surveys the perturbed and anxious faces about her.

All are silent.

‘What! have you all lost your tongues? Brother, go into your room and close the door. Do as I tell you! close it, tight!—Now, then, who unlocked that door?—Do not all speak at once.—’Tilda, did you?’

‘No, marm.’

‘Mary?’

At this point Martha, who has been partly hidden in shadow, steps forward into the light, and says:

‘It was I, Mrs. Warren.’

It is no wonder that the latter starts back in surprise at sight of the apparition before her. Unkempt, with her abundant hair streaming about her face, her waterproof in tatters, through which traces of still more disordered apparel are here and there visible, an ugly smirch upon her cheek and great crimson stains appearing through a handkerchief with which she has enveloped her hands—our heroine, at this moment, bears but little resemblance to the Martha Summerfield hitherto known to these pages.

‘Well, and who are *you*?’ demands Mrs.

Warren, looking her contemptuously over from head to foot.

'Tilda, who is quaking in her shoes from a double fear that she has harboured an impostor, and will be obliged to disgorge her ill-gotten twenty pounds, awaits the answer with a beating heart.

'I am Martha Summerfield.'

'Well, Martha Summerfield,' replies the other, with perfect composure, 'what is your business here?'

'To discover my father. I supposed him to be in that room. I now find that I am mistaken, and have been guilty of a great indiscretion, for which I offer you my sincere apologies.'

'Well, upon my word!' says Mrs. Warren, in a caustic manner, 'this is quite stage-like—a farce after a tragedy. You never chanced to have a brother Japhet, did you? *He* was in search of a father, too.'

Martha flames red in an instant.

'Mrs. Warren, do you know to whom you are speaking?' she cries.

'To Martha Summerfield, I believe, unless that is a pseudonym,' replies the other, with a sneer.

'Mrs.——'

‘One moment, if you please. I will talk to you presently. ’Tilda, where is Joey?’

‘He has gone on an errand, mim.’

‘When he returns, tell him to bring a policeman as quickly as possible.’

‘Yes’m,’ says ’Tilda, white as a ghost, and in a perfect ague of apprehension at the possible consequences of her guilt.

The hot blood now tingles to Martha’s very finger-nails.

‘What do you mean by this indignity?’ she hoarsely demands.

‘I mean to obtain a satisfactory explanation of your presence here to-night, that is all.’

‘Have I not already given one?’

Mrs. Warren laughs sarcastically.

‘I have no acquaintance with you. I have never even seen you before. And yet, upon my return, I find that you have entered my house by some means of which I am yet to learn. Possibly you bribed one of my servants; did you?’

’Tilda hangs upon the answer as though her life depended upon it.

‘I did not,’ Martha answers; ‘I learned by inquiries in the neighbourhood of the existence of that barred and bolted chamber,

and of that unfortunate gentleman whose death I believe, by God's mercy, I have been enabled to prevent. Believing, for many reasons—with all of which, Mrs. Warren, you should be acquainted—that I had traced to this house, and to that chamber, a beloved parent, for whom I have been searching long and patiently, I committed the indiscretion for which you seem disposed to hold me criminally accountable.'

For her sole answer, Mrs. Warren says :

'Come down-stairs with me.'

At the door of the breakfast-room she stops and calls to 'Tilda, 'Send the servants into the kitchen, and remain here with Miss Summerfield until Joey returns.' Then, turning to Martha, she adds, 'What you have said is very inconclusive and unsatisfactory. It is not my habit to give an ear to mystery and marvel mongers ; and in such cases as these, I trust in the competency of the police to unravel what may or what may not have a bearing upon my silver spoons and other personal property.'

Again the angry crimson mounts to Martha's face, and she begins a hasty retort, when Mrs. Warren interrupts her with :

'By your own admission, you have placed

yourself in a false position ; and I do not see why I am expected to exercise any conspicuous amount of leniency under circumstances so confessedly against you. However, if you will give me the address of somebody in the neighbourhood, who will come here this evening and vouch for your respectability, and satisfactorily explain your extraordinary conduct, I will agree to dispense with the services of the police.'

So bewildered is Martha at the effectual way in which the tables have been turned against her, that she forgets for a moment to have recourse to a note-book in which she keeps a list of London addresses. Then, remembering it, she opens the leaves with no definite idea of discovering what she requires, until, her eyes resting upon a well-known name, she suddenly brightens and exclaims :

'My solicitor lives in Haverstock Hill. His office is at 101, Lincoln's Inn Fields.'

'101, Lincoln's Inn Fields!' repeats Mrs. Warren, with a start of surprise. 'What is his name?'

'Mr. Palmer ; and he will gladly come, if he is at home. Will you permit your servant to go after him in a hansom at my expense?'

Mrs. Warren, consenting to the proposition,

Joey, upon his return, is at once despatched, with a sovereign and a hasty note in Martha's handwriting, to Haverstock Hill.

Then Mrs. Warren ascends to her brother's room, and Martha is left alone with a set of very *bizarre* reflections.

Meanwhile, in conformity with her mistress's instructions, 'Tilda, after locking and bolting the front-door, patrols the lower hall, into which the breakfast-room and *pro tempore* prison-cell opens.

END OF VOL. II.



